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NONE SO TENDER-HEARTED: THE CHRISTOLOGICAL
PATTERN OF COMPASSION IN THE PASTORAL
CARE OF JOHN FLAVEL

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NONE SO TENDER-HEARTED: THE CHRISTOLOGICAL
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To those who had a share in the burden

Liza, Caroline, (and Daniel)

And especially Meghan

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Works *The Works of John Flavel*. 6 vols. 1820. Reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015

PREFACE

The reality is that while a project of this size is written by one person, there are sacrifices made by many to make it possible. My wife, Meghan, has been a constant source of stability during the ebbs and flows of the workload. My heart trusts in her, and I have had no lack of gain. I love you and I am indebted to you for all your prayers and support. Our children Liza, Caroline, (and Daniel) enrich my life in ways I never expected. I did not understand the meaning of sympathy until I became a parent.

I also must acknowledge my parents, Ken and Linda Elliott, who gave to their children more than they had. They worked tirelessly and I never heard them complain. Their wonder over God's provision for them over the years always caught my attention. A child can never repay his parents. This accomplishment is half theirs.

There are many who supported me over the course of my studies. I am grateful for Cornerstone Presbyterian Church as well as Christ Presbyterian Church for providing the resources and time to complete my work. I am also thankful for my dissertation committee, especially Stephen Yuille, who looked upon this orphaned student with compassion and became my advisor. To John Flavel, a fellow Presbyterian, I look forward to meeting you one day.

To Christ, whose "mercies and compassions over his people are exceedingly great and tender."

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

To be faithful to Scripture, pastoral theology must account for the notion and practice of compassion, for the Christian church is a burden-bearing church, serving a compassionate God.¹ Examples abound. Inscribed in her music, she sings, “Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not.”² Embedded in her creeds, she confesses, “Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven.”³ More importantly, it is written in her Scriptures: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).⁴ Reflecting on the tender-heartedness of Christ, Thomas Goodwin writes, “As now he is in heaven, sitting at God’s right hand and interceding for

¹ Derek Tidball admits to the difficulty of defining pastoral theology, noting that it “is an elusive and complex discipline.” Derek Tidball, *Skilful Shepherds* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 18. He suggests that it “properly relates to the interface between theology and Christian doctrine on the one hand, and pastoral experience and care on the other.” In sum, it is “theology seen from the shepherding perspective” (24). Thomas Oden offers a similar perspective: “Pastoral theology is that branch of Christian theology that deals with the office and functions of the pastor. It is theology because it treats of the consequences of God’s self-disclosure in history. It is pastoral because it deals with those consequences as they pertain to the roles, tasks, duties, and work of the pastor.” Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1983), x. Albert Martin offers a succinct statement of its aim: “this discipline has as its concern the witness of Scripture to the actual work of shepherding the flock of God.” Albert N. Martin, *The Man of God: His Calling and Godly Life*, vol. 1 (Montville, NJ: Trinity Pulpit Press, 2018), 6.

² Randy Petersen, *Be Still, My Soul* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014), 102. The compassion of God permeates the hymnody of the Christian church. Two further examples will suffice. Consider John Wesley’s *Love Divine All Loves Excelling*: “Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down . . . Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art.” Petersen, *Be Still, My Soul*, 202. John Fawcett in the eighteenth century expresses, “We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear” (46).

³ Trueman quotes the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. It reads, “who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven.” Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 94.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version.

us; how he is affected and graciously disposed towards sinners on earth that do come to him . . . how tender to pity them in all their infirmities.”⁵ Pressing the church into the pattern of Christ, J. C. Ryle implores, “Let us strive to be men and women of a tender heart and a sympathizing spirit. Let us never be ashamed to weep with them that weep, and rejoice with them that rejoice.”⁶ The church possesses a tender-hearted calling because she serves a tender-hearted God.⁷

Even so, a study of compassion may appear somewhat gratuitous. After all, what more might be added to such a basic and obvious attribute of God? Moreover, it might seem rather objectionable to subject the warmth of Christian compassion to such academic sterility. Notwithstanding, the church assumes the need to be consistently reminded of God’s compassions and the corresponding pattern of Christ as the calling of the church. In his publication, *Gentle and Lowly*, Dane Ortlund reminds the church that its understanding of God needs consistent reformation, for the people of God often have an impoverished and inaccurate view of God’s lavish heart.⁸ Likewise, the English Puritans were eager to remind the church of Christ’s compassion. They resisted objections from troubled sinners, whose reluctance to come to Christ stemmed from a profound awareness of their wretchedness. John Flavel declares, “Come sinners, give me leave to tell you, you have a text before you, that clears the way of your duty and

⁵ Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 1–2.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *The Power and Sympathy of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2018), 68.

⁷ This is not to say that compassion is the solitary quality of the faithful shepherd in pastoral care, as though it would exclude justice or truth. Rather, as Tidball suggests, “The shepherd’s work, therefore, demanded a subtle blend of authority and care.” Tidball, *Skilful Shepherds*, 46. Laniak provides a complimentary perspective: “The shepherding image is especially useful for holding in tension these essential features of leadership. Authority without compassion leads to harsh authoritarianism. Compassion without authority leads to social chaos.” Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 247.

⁸ Dane C. Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 157–58.

salvation at once; If any man, be he what he will, be his sins never so great, yet if he hear my voice, and open the door, I will come into him.”⁹ Likewise, Richard Sibbes asserts, “Let all know that none are fitter for comfort than those that think themselves furthest off. Men, for the most part, are not lost enough in their own feeling for a Saviour. A holy despair in ourselves is the ground of true hope. In God, the fatherless find mercy.”¹⁰ For the Puritans, evangelism necessitated a God of compassion, ready and willing to receive poor souls in need of pity.

Yet, pervasive modern notions of Puritanism would suggest that their way of life provides an inadequate and distorted guide in the difficult terrain of compassion and sympathy.¹¹ After all, what could cold and unfeeling people teach modern man about the pain of others? Appealing to Nathaniel Hawthorn’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Abram Van Engen captures this sentiment in the American mind: “According to the American literary tradition, sympathy was a quality that the Puritans neither admired nor possessed. Sometimes with a hint of praise, often with a good deal of rebuke, all seem to know that those early settlers of New England were built of nothing else—or more—than iron.”¹² Many of these assumptions have been challenged in recent decades. Leland Ryken, for example, discredits the perception that the Puritans repressed feelings for the sake of their

⁹ John Flavel, *England’s Duty under the Present Gospel Liberty*, in *Works*, 4:165.

¹⁰ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 14.

¹¹ The bias is frequently noted. Doriani argues against the vilification of the Puritans with respect to sexuality concluding that the Puritans did not vilify sexuality, but rather worked toward the reformation of marriage and sexuality. Daniel M Doriani, “The Puritans, Sex, and Pleasure,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53, no. 1 (1991): 125. Bremer concludes, “The image of puritans as theocrats, regicides, witch-burners, Indian killers, and bigoted heresy hunters has long been entrenched in popular culture. Most of these are distortions if not absolute falsehoods, but the stereotypes are deeply embedded.” Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1. C. S. Lewis noted this phenomenon in the *Screwtape Letters*: “In modern Christian writings, though I see much (indeed more than I like) about Mammon, I see few of the old warnings about Worldly Vanities, the Choice of Friends, and the Value of Time. All that, your patient would probably classify as ‘Puritanism’—and may I remark in passing that the value we have given to that word is one of the really solid triumphs of the last hundred years?” C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 51.

¹² Abram Van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

religious convictions. “The Puritans were warmly human in their feelings. They spoke repeatedly about nurturing good ‘affections,’ that is, emotion.”¹³ Indeed, the subject of the affections pervades the teaching and preaching of the Puritans.¹⁴ J. I. Packer notes that the “affectionate practical English writers” were expositors of the conscience, bringing conviction and humility to the whole man, including the “dispositional ‘affections’ (not just waves of passing emotion, but set inclinations of heart with a feeling tone).”¹⁵ Given that the Puritans considered the affections to be closely aligned with the desires of the heart, there is insight to be gained from a study of Puritan compassion.¹⁶

Many of these insights may be found in the life and teaching and John Flavel, the seventeenth-century English Puritan of Dartmouth. Embracing the notion of the affections, Flavel disparaged the expulsion of natural emotion.¹⁷ For example, providing

¹³ Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 4–5.

¹⁴ Various scholars have researched this pervasive theme. For example, Dever has explored the affectionate theology of Richard Sibbes remarking that “especially important is his emphasis on the affections, or emotions, in the life of the Christian, as well as his insistence on the possibility of the Christian’s being assured of his salvation and his exploration of the role of the conscience in the Christian life.” Mark Dever, *The Affectionate Theology of Richard Sibbes* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2018), 6. Likewise, Steven Yuille documents the affectionate theology of George Swinnock, arguing that the sanctification of the affections is central in the renewal of man after the image of God. Stephen Yuille, *Puritan Spirituality: The Fear of God in the Affective Theology of George Swinnock* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 72.

¹⁵ Packer goes on to explain that “their stress on the importance of these dispositions, and their constant efforts to evoke and strengthen them (joy, sorrow, desire, fear, and so on, all directed to their proper objects), explains why the writers were called ‘affectionate.’” J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 66.

¹⁶ The notion of compassion and fellow feeling were not isolated to English Puritanism. For example, Van Engen argues that the concept of fellow feeling “pervaded New England Puritanism and affected the shape of its literature.” Abram Van Engen, “Puritanism and the Power of Sympathy,” *Early American Literature* 45, no. 3 (November 2010): 533. As a notable example, William Hooke urges New Englanders to grieve and feel with their brothers and sisters in England arguing “that it is the part of true friends and brethren, to sympathize and fellow-feel with their brethren and friends when the hand of God is upon them.” William Hooke, *New England’s Tears, for Old England’s Fears* (London, 1641), 2.

¹⁷ The Puritans rarely used the terminology of emotion, predominately preferring to use the notion of the affections. Flavel does, however, use the term on five occasions throughout his works—both positively and negatively. Flavel uses the word exclusively of human persons, never attributing emotion to the essential nature of God. Positively, Flavel acknowledges that the sinner must recognize the savior who exists and invites sinners to come to him in order for his emotions to follow after Christ. “The soul must believe that Christ is, or else there can be no emotions of the soul after him.” John Flavel, *The Method of Grace in Gospel Redemption*, in *Works*, 2:172. Negatively, Flavel discusses disunity and dissention in the church: “Yet I doubt not but that all discords amongst the godly might be extinguished, whatever some may allege to the contrary, if the minds of some were freed from the violent emotions of suspicion, anger, and

wisdom regarding forgiveness, Flavel writes that it “consists not in a stoical insensibility of wrongs and injuries. God hath not made men as insensible, stupid blocks, that have no sense or feeling of what is done to them.”¹⁸ Elsewhere, Flavel speaks favorably of some degree of fear noting, “There is a natural fear in every man . . . it is not my purpose to commend to you a stoical apathy, nor yet to take you off from such a degree of cautional, preventive fear as may fit you for trouble, and be serviceable to your souls.”¹⁹ Speaking directly of the affections, Flavel argues that while Christianity does not expel human inclinations, Christ alters and transforms that which is inordinate. “And by the affections we are to understand, not the natural, but the inordinate affections; for Christ doth not abolish and destroy, but correct and regulate the affections of those that are in him.”²⁰ Essentially, human affections (and emotions) are God-given and fall under the restorative power of God, as he reorders them in Christ.

Acknowledging that the notion of human compassion needs to account for these aspects of human experience, Flavel’s theology of compassion potentially addresses several pertinent issues in contemporary pastoral care. For example, research of Puritan compassion conveys an alternate mentality to a strain of entrenched intellectualism in contemporary evangelicalism, characterized by skepticism or opposition to any form of emotion in Christian practice.²¹ Second, in the midst of society’s increased moral

envy.” Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:12.

¹⁸ John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life: A Display of Christ in His Essential and Mediatorial Glory*, in *Works*, 1:378.

¹⁹ John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed, or The Great Work of a Christian Explained and Applied*, in *Works*, 5:450–51.

²⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:369.

²¹ J. I. Packer has identified entrenched intellectualists as those who “present themselves as rigid, argumentative, critical Christians, champions of God’s truth for whom orthodoxy is all. Upholding and defending their own view of that truth, whether Calvinist or Arminian, dispensational or Pentecostal, national church reformist or Free Church separatist, or whatever it might be, is their leading interest, and they invest themselves unstintingly in this task. There is little warmth about them; relationally they are remote; experiences do not mean to them; winning the battle for mental correctness is their one great purpose.” Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 31.

degeneracy, it becomes tempting to suppose “that the only work left for God is judgment.”²² Yet, a rigorous theology of compassion insists on a reconsideration of alternative convictions such as hope for an evil world. Third, every generation of Christianity must wrestle with the emotional toll and problem of evil, provoking believers to doubt and distrust God’s compassionate nature.²³ Naturally, it would not be unreasonable to expect a theology of compassion to furnish shepherds with a vision of wise and tender pastoral care in the face of suffering.

Thesis

Taking these issues into account, I argue that compassion occupies a prominent position in John Flavel’s pastoral care, embedded in a Christological pattern and featured preeminently in the God-man, Jesus Christ.²⁴ Additionally, an ancillary objective is to demonstrate that a recovery of compassion in Flavel’s Christology provides sensible moorings and practical nuance for contemporary pastoral theology. The study is decidedly theological, resting on the assumption that biblical pastoral care necessitates a robust connection with theology.²⁵ The study is also correlatively practical, demonstrating

²² Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014), xxii.

²³ Regarding the differentiation between the logical problem of evil and the emotional problem of evil, see Moreland and Craig’s *Philosophical Foundations*, chapter 29 on the problem of evil. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 540–55.

²⁴ To say that compassion occupies a prominent position Flavel’s pastoral care is not to say that it is the most prominent aspect nor that it functions singularly within his theology. Rather, it emerges to such a degree that it runs contrarily to soul care paradigms that dismiss or minimize an adequate Christian response to human suffering.

²⁵ Purves argues that “contemporary pastoral care is, by and large, uninformed by historical practice. One consequence is that much pastoral work today is disaffiliated from the church’s theological heritage.” Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 5. Akin and Pace contend that when ministry is detached from theology it runs the risk of pragmatism, moralism, egotism, and cynicism. Daniel L. Akin and R. Scott Pace, *Pastoral Theology: Theological Foundations for Who a Pastor Is and What He Does* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 3. For a fuller treatment, see Purves’s introductory chapter in *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*. Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), xiii–xxxv.

how Flavel's theology transitions to pastoral application.

Flavel conceptualizes compassion as a divine disposition of God's goodness specifically directed to the afflicted. God places (or implants) compassion in mankind as his creation, made in his image. Expressed in every human capacity—especially the functions of the soul (including cognition, affection, and volition)—human compassion has been distorted and disordered by the fall and restored again by the regeneration of the Spirit by faith in the application of the person and work of Christ. God most clearly reveals and expresses his compassion in the person of Christ. Flavel aligns the notion of compassion with a variety of concepts including tenderness, sympathy, pity, and mercy.

Revealing the larger scheme of his teaching, Flavel applies pastoral compassion through the prism of a threefold, interconnected Christological pattern.²⁶ This pattern consists of the person of Christ, union with Christ, and Christ's mystical body. Essentially, these three doctrinal points offer perspectives on Flavel's teaching of compassion, providing a holistic vision of its nature, attributes, and practice.²⁷ All the

²⁶ Stating that they are interconnected acknowledges Flavel's belief that the doctrine of union with Christ is predicated on the person of Christ and the hypostatic union. Likewise, communion with Christ and membership in his mystical body necessitates union with the person of Christ. Take for instance Flavel's conclusion regarding Christ's assumption of a human nature: "it is a dignity above that of angels, for Christ took not on him their nature, and the hypostatic union is the ground and foundation of the mystical union." Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:129.

²⁷ John Frame has articulated a methodology of knowledge rooted in the Trinity, taking into account man's finitude. He acknowledges that human knowledge is limited by one's own perspective and that perspectives are built into creation because God created many people. "A perspective, literally, is a position from which a person sees something. It is the standpoint, the angle from which he looks." Frame goes on to explain that as we explore broader and broader contexts and perspectives, "these will lead us to indefinite numbers of additional perspectives, enlarging the knowledge available to our present perspective." John M. Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2017), 2–3. Frame differentiates between various objects of knowledge, frequently using the tripartite schemes of authority, power, and presence or the perspectives of normativity, situational, and existential. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1987), 62–88. Frame argues that a perspectival methodology is a helpful pedagogical tool to organize and present theology, offering numerous suggestions how triads emerge in theology. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2002), 743–50. Poythress argues that one advantage of perspectives is that it brings together fields of knowledge and study that are frequently compartmentalized. Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1987), 27. In the introduction to *Theology in Three Dimensions*, Sweeting contends that perspectivalism calls us to a holistic vision and avoids the temptation of lopsidedness in our theology. He states, "as I read church history and observe culture, I note that different eras tend to emphasize different dimensions of human nature. One era sees things this way. The next era often reacts against this. In reacting it sometimes even condemns the original action. Frame,

compassions of God are grounded in the essential nature of God revealed in the person of Christ. In union with Christ, all the compassions of God are given in espousal to Christ, as believers experience the greatest honors and kindnesses of God in their union with him. In Christ mystical, all the compassions of God are governed and transformed in Christ, as they emulate his compassionate calling in their discipleship. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that Christ is the preeminent embodiment and arbiter of compassion. Flavel succinctly summarizes the argument writing, “The mercies and compassions of God are all in Christ.”²⁸

This theological starting point is even more important given the predominant functional approach to pastoral care, a strategy that veers towards the danger of ministerial pragmatism. As a result, references to pastoral compassion frequently consist of cursory statements that place the pastor under the obligation of “feeling compassionate” in the various roles he assumes and circumstances he encounters. Flavel’s theological emphasis provides a holistic theological grounding for compassionate pastoral care.

In addition, given the fact that post-Enlightenment philosophy and psychology have arguably introduced a score of ideas that have cast a fog over Christian thinking regarding compassion—not the least of which includes the notion of empathy—pastoral theology shoulders a burden to provide stabilizing moorings to maintain a steady course in biblical faithfulness. This study provides a framework by which to evaluate contemporary theology and practice of compassion in soul care. In other words, Flavel’s Christology serves as an interpretive axis by which pastoral care ought to discerningly put on “as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts” (Col 3:12).

Theology in Three Dimensions, xi–xii. For the application of perspectivalism to philosophy: Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

²⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:136.

Before pivoting to Flavel’s theology of compassion, it is appropriate to articulate the suitability of Flavel for such a study. The remainder of this chapter proceeds along three lines, exploring Flavel’s biography, lexicography, and Christology. From his biography, four reasons emerge why Flavel’s life and teaching serve as a fitting object of study. Second, a survey of Flavel’s nomenclature reveals a rich diversity of vocabulary associated with compassion, while providing a context for semantic clarity and conceptual distinctions.²⁹ Last, an examination of Flavel’s Christological focus offers warrant for the adopted pattern as an apt scheme for his theology of compassion.

John Flavel

John Flavel was a presbyterian minister who lived in seventeenth-century England.³⁰ Though especially prominent among the many distinguished figures of Puritan thought—such as Richard Baxter, John Owen, and John Bunyan—Flavel has been

²⁹ Because Flavel dedicated no single treatise or book to compassion, the study inherently involves a synthesis and organization of material across the entirety of Flavel’s works. Such an endeavor runs eisegetical risks, placing preconceived notions of compassion over or against Flavel’s actual teaching. This research mitigates against this tendency by demonstrating that Flavel aligns his understanding of compassion with his understanding of Christ. Indeed, it is the supposition of this study that Flavel views Christ as the finest and preeminent expression of compassion. By virtue of their union with Christ, believers experience all the compassion of God as well as submit to the practice of biblical compassion as they follow him.

³⁰ There has been significant debate in defining Puritanism. Including Presbyterians and Independents alike across Protestantism, it certainly cannot be concluded that it was a denominational movement. Other terms have been applied to Puritanism include dissenter and nonconformist. These terms pivot the locus of definition in the purification of the Christian religion from the Catholic Church. Agreeing with Trevelyan, Knappen suggests that the term designates “the outlook of those English Protestants who actively favored a reformation beyond that which the crown was willing to countenance and who yet stopped short of Anabaptism.” M. M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism: A Chapter in the History of Idealism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), viii, 489. See G. M. Trevelyan, *England under the Stuarts* (London: Routledge, 2002), 56. Haller concurs noting that historic Puritanism “was a movement for reform of religion, Puritan in spirit, begun by the successors of Chaucer’s parson early in the reign of Elizabeth.” William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 5. Collinson acknowledges that the term designated various aspects of the movement, including morality along with church policy and political dynamics with respect to religion. He concludes that Puritanism’s supreme achievement was “to harness the potentially turbulent religious energies of popular, vernacular Protestantism and to direct them along the relatively docile channels of the conditioned and controlled religious experience which was Calvinism. Our conclusion is that puritanism in society was as much a stabilizing as a revolutionary and transformative force.” Patrick Collinson, *English Puritanism* (London: Historical Association, 1983), 31. Packer offers a refreshingly plain but equitable assessment, stating that the Puritans were mature believers, “passionately concerned with God and godliness,” offering a vision of the Christian life while ultimately seeking to complete what the English Reformation started. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 28.

described as the “lost Puritan.”³¹ Notwithstanding the relative vacuum of Flavel research, his extensive writings and sermons are readily accessible. Flavel’s complete works, published in 1968 by Banner of Truth, are a reprint of the 1820 edition by W. Baynes and Son.³² The most best known biography of Flavel is the anonymous sketch included in *The Works of John Flavel*. Cosby asserts that “the anonymous author of this account claims to have known Flavel and offers glowing praise of Flavel’s life and character.”³³ Also among the several biographies of Flavel is the account given by John Galpine in *Flavel, The Quaker, and the Crown*.³⁴ Galpine crafts a thoroughly favorable picture of Flavel, stating that he was a man “of choice and excellent parts, both natural and acquired; of a sound and solid judgment, of warm and lively affections, of a quick and fruitful invention, and of a ready expression and elocution; all which he had mightily improved by many years study and labors in the word and doctrine.”³⁵

Biography

Flavel was born in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, sometime between 1627 and

³¹ Brian H Cosby, “John Flavel: The ‘Lost’ Puritan,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3, no. 1 (January 2011): 113. (Cosby does not assert that Flavel is “the lost” Puritan.) Flavel is among the forgotten. Yuille describes a similar situation with George Swinnock: “Despite these favorable critiques, Swinnock is essentially a forgotten Puritan.” He goes on to state, “The same is true today. Swinnock is conspicuously absent from academic research into English Puritanism, and he is seldom mentioned in the secondary literature related to the time period.” Yuille, *Puritan Spirituality*, 2.

³² Boone argues that the 1830 edition of Flavel’s works well represents the original editions. Clifford B. Boone, *Puritan Evangelism: Preaching for Conversion in Late-Seventeenth Century English Puritanism* (London: Paternoster, 2013), 52. Even so, Parker criticizes most Flavel studies for their reliance on the Banner of Truth reprint. Nathan Parker, “Proselytisation and Apocalypticism in the British Atlantic World: The Theology of John Flavel” (PhD diss., 2013), 46–49. The discrepancies that do exist between the 19th century edition and the originals do not amount to the use of the former being a “methodological flaw.”

³³ He goes on to note that “most modern synopses of Flavel’s life have been taken from this early anonymous biographical sketch.” Brian H. Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life and Thought in Stuart England* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 14.

³⁴ John Galpine, “A Short Life of John Flavel,” in *Flavel, The Quaker and the Crown: John Flavel, Clement Lake, and Religious Liberty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, MA: Rhwymbooks, 2000). Galpine was a friend of John Flavel.

³⁵ Galpine, “A Short Life of John Flavel,” 14–15.

1630.³⁶ Not much is known about his early years, except that he was the son of Richard Flavel, an eminent Presbyterian minister described as “a person of such extraordinary piety.”³⁷ He had two sons, John and Phinehas, both of whom became ministers. John “was religiously educated by his father, and having profited well at the grammar schools, was sent early to Oxford, and settled a commoner in University College.”³⁸ Though he entered Oxford around the year 1646, he did not matriculate.³⁹ Instead, he took a role as an assistant pastor in the town of Diptford around 1650.⁴⁰ Regarding Flavel’s parents, both were arrested and taken to prison in 1665 for convening a nonconformist worship meeting.⁴¹ Though they were eventually released, they caught the plague in prison and died sometime thereafter.

After the death of Mr. Walplate, Flavel became the primary minister in Diptford, Devon. Around 1655, he married Joan Randall. Tragically, Joan died in childbirth along with their son. Embry states that this event “crushed” [Flavel].⁴² In speaking to a distressed mother over the death of her son, Flavel recounts his own grief:

You cannot forget that in the years lately past, the Almighty visited my tabernacle with the rod, and in one year cut off from it the root, and the branch, the tender mother, and the only son. What the effect of those strokes, or rather of my own unmortified passions were, I have felt, and you and others have heard. Surely I was as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke. Yea, I may say with them, Lam. iii 19,20.

³⁶ Cosby argues that his birthdate is unknown, as scholars are divided between earlier and later dates. Cosby favors 1630 due to the baptismal record as well as a posthumous effigy noting his age at death. Cosby, *John Flavel*, 14.

³⁷ “The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Minister of Dartmouth,” in *Works*, 1:iii.

³⁸ “The Life of John Flavel,” in *Works*, 1:iv.

³⁹ Cosby asserts that this was because Parliament sent a delegation to Oxford to inquire as to its welfare during the war. They required faculty and students to sign the Solemn League and Covenant (1642), which forced many professors and students to leave. Cosby, *John Flavel*, 15.

⁴⁰ A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised: Being a Revision of Edmund Calamy’s Account of the Ministers and Others Ejected and Silenced, 1660–2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 200.

⁴¹ Cosby, *John Flavel*, 15.

⁴² Adam Embry, *Keeper of the Great Seal of Heaven: Sealing of the Spirit in the Life and Thought of John Flavel* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 17.

Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall, my soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me.⁴³

After some time, Flavel was persuaded to marry again. He wed Elizabeth Morris and she gave birth to a child in 1657.⁴⁴ Around this time, Flavel received a call from a seaport town in the county of Devon, which had unanimously chosen him to succeed their recently deceased minister, Anthony Hartford.⁴⁵ Kwai Sing Chang notes that Flavel accepted the call to Dartmouth despite receiving a smaller stipend, and it was there that “he spent the rest of his life, except for the periods of ejection.”⁴⁶ Some called him “the sea preacher” because he ministered to many captains and sailors in the port city.⁴⁷

As a faithful minister of the gospel, Flavel labored for the conversion of souls and the improvement of the flock’s knowledge of Christ and service to him.⁴⁸ In reference to Christ’s oblation, he writes, “Then let us improve, in every condition, this sacrifice, and labour to get hearts duly affected with such a sight as faith can give us of it.”⁴⁹ Flavel was an earnest student, familiar with classical literature and possessed a familiarity with several languages.⁵⁰ He also exhibited a special gift of prayer and

⁴³ John Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity, or The Signs of Grace and Symptoms of Hypocrisy*, in *Works*, 5:604.

⁴⁴ Cosby asserts that Flavel had five children in all. Cosby, *John Flavel*, 16.

⁴⁵ The anonymous biographer of Flavel reports that there were three reasons why they chose Flavel. First, there were exceptions against the other candidates. Second, they believed he could bring unity and healing to the people. Third, since it was a large town, Dartmouth needed someone capable to handle the workload. “The Life of John Flavel,” in *Works*, 1:v.

⁴⁶ Kwai Sing Chang, “John Flavel of Dartmouth, 1630–1691” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1952), 24–25.

⁴⁷ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 4, *The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 317. Flavel wrote several works associated with navigation, sailing, and spirituality. Among them are *Navigation Spiritualized* and *A Narrative of Some Late and Wonderful Sea Deliverances*.

⁴⁸ Various scholars have noted Flavel’s evangelistic emphasis. Bonne argues that Flavel’s theology of effectual calling is the main factor influencing his evangelistic sermons. Boone, *Puritan Evangelism*. Parker investigates Flavel’s evangelism with respect to his views on the apocalypse. Parker, “Proselytisation and Apocalypticism.”

⁴⁹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 164.

⁵⁰ Boone outlines the scope of his knowledge: “In his *Works* he quotes or refers to more than 550 different authors, historical figures and contemporaries. This list of those he cites reads like a library

preaching. Flavel initially shared the ministerial duties at Dartmouth with Allein Geere: “Mr. Flavel was to preach on the Lord’s-day at Townstall, the mother-church standing upon a hill without the town; and every fortnight in his turn at the Wednesday’s Lecture in Dartmouth.”⁵¹ Throughout Flavel’s preaching ministry, the Lord blessed him with many conversions. Cosby notes that, though Flavel was deeply concerned with the reformation efforts in England, “his chief concern throughout his ministry fell with his Dartmouth congregation—with a desire to encourage their growth in the knowledge of and love for God as well as their growth in personal holiness.”⁵² Yet, despite his personal giftedness, earnest service, and the evident fruit of his labors, Flavel was not without opposition in his ministry.

Given the political and religious instability of England in the seventeenth century, Flavel suffered significant religious persecution due to his nonconformity to the institutionalized, national church. After the restoration of Charles II, Parliament implemented a series of Acts aimed at silencing nonconformity. “The Corporation Act had removed Puritan magistrates; the Act of Uniformity had silenced Puritan ministers; the Conventicle Act of 1664 struck at the rank and file of nonconformity.”⁵³ Worsening

catalogue. We note here only a few examples representative of various categories from which he read and quoted. He drew upon Greek philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Socrates); Greek church fathers (Athanasius, Chrysostom, Clement, Cyril, Irenaeus, Origen); Latin church fathers (Ambrose, Augustine, Cyprian, Jerome, Lactantius, Tertullian); Roman Catholic theologians (Baronius, Bellarmine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Adrian, Suarez); continental Reformers and theologians (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Alsted, Bullinger, Buxtorf, Zanchius); Scottish Protestant theologians (Cameron, Durham, Rutherford); Caroline divines (Laud, Taylor, Herbert, Fuller); early Puritans (Ames, Cartwright, Perkins, Rogers); contemporary Puritans (Baxter, Richard Bernard, Burroughs, Caryl, Charnock, Cotton, Goodwin, Owen); and others from divergent perspectives such as Amyraldus, Bucer, Crisp, Davenant, Grotius, Keach, Seneca, and Plutarch. The list is immense in both scope and size.” Boone, *Puritan Evangelism*, 53.

⁵¹ One of his listeners said of him: “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.” “The Life of John Flavel,” in *Works*, 1:vi.

⁵² Cosby, *John Flavel*, 25.

⁵³ Gerald R. Cragg, *Puritanism in the Period of the Great Persecution 1660–1688* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11. Cragg notes that Parliament was genuinely afraid of a Cromwellian resurgence: “Legislation of this kind was partly inspired by revenge, but in equal measure it was prompted

the situation for Flavel and the dissenters, Parliament imposed the Five Mile Act in 1665, which effectively forbade any clergy from teaching, preaching, or living within five miles of any town where they had previously ministered. Though he relocated to Slapton, a parish about five miles from Dartmouth, Flavel continued to preach and serve his congregation, often secretly in the woods under the threat of discovery and capture by the authorities.⁵⁴ It was not until the Declaration of Indulgence in 1687, issued by James II, that Flavel was able to return to Dartmouth with full ministerial freedom. “Mr. Flavel, who had formerly been confined to a corner, shone brightly, as a flaming beacon upon the top of a hill. His affectionate people prepared a large place for him, where God blessed his labours to the conviction of many people.”⁵⁵

There were additional afflictive providences in Flavel’s life, including the death of his second wife Elizabeth. He married a third time, Anne Downs, and they had several children. After Ann’s death, he married Dorothy Jeffries, who outlived him.⁵⁶ Despite these difficult moments, Flavel improved the time given to him. In his exile in Slapton, he produced several works, including *Husbandry Spiritualized*. In all, he wrote 22 books, many of which are compilations of sermons on specific topics.⁵⁷ Flavel intended that all his works should contribute toward the improvement of heavenly

by fear” (12).

⁵⁴ Freeman documents several instances of Flavel’s secret ministry. “He once rode to Totnes disguised as a woman to baptize a baby. He sometimes held meetings on the Saltstone, in the middle of Salcombe estuary, which was accessible only at a low water at Spring tides. When pursued by those out to arrest him he once escaped by riding his horse into the sea and swimming it round to Slapton Sands.” Ray Freeman, *John Flavel: A Famous Dartmouth Puritan* (Dartmouth: Dartmouth History Research Group, 2001), 5.

⁵⁵ “The Life of John Flavel,” in *Works*, 1:ix.

⁵⁶ Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, 201.

⁵⁷ Flavel’s largest volumes include *The Fountain of Life: A Display of Christ in his Essential and Mediatorial Glory*, *The Method of Grace in Gospel Redemption*, and *Pneumatologia: A Treatise on the Soul of Man*. Among his more popular works include *A Saint Indeed* and *Divine Conduct or The Mystery of Providence*.

things.⁵⁸

Toward the end of dinner on June 26, 1691, Flavel complained of a deadness in one of his hands, and he was unable to lift it to his head. After being carried to his room, and aware of approaching death, Flavel stated, “I know that it will be well with me.”⁵⁹ “Thus died this holy man of God suddenly, and without pain, not giving so much as one groan.”⁶⁰ After a sermon preached by Mr. Tross on 2 Kings 2:12, Flavel was laid to rest in Dartmouth church.⁶¹

There are four particulars of Flavel’s life and ministry that make him a worthy subject for this study. First, Flavel’s familiarity with suffering shaped his ministry. Having experienced the furnace of grief in the death of his first wife and son, Flavel writes to a grieving mother, “It was my earnest desire, so soon I had strength and opportunity for so great a journey to visit you, that so, if the Lord had pleased, I might both refresh and be refreshed by you, after all my sad and disconsolate days.”⁶² Flavel endured the deaths of his second and third wives and years of religious persecution. In addition to shouldering the burdens of his congregation from a distance, he encountered animosity, having his effigy carried and burned in the streets of Dartmouth.⁶³ “Flavel faced the continual threat of persecution, arrest, fines, and imprisonment from state officials for being a nonconformist minister.”⁶⁴ Murray writes, “Flavel’s writings reveal

⁵⁸ For a succinct treatment of Flavel’s influence, see Boone’s treatment of the popularity and use of Flavel’s written works. Boone, *Puritan Evangelism*, 41–46.

⁵⁹ “The Life of John Flavel,” in *Works*, 1:xv.

⁶⁰ “The Life of John Flavel,” in *Works*, 1:xv.

⁶¹ Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, 21.

⁶² John Flavel, *A Token for Mourners*, in *Works*, 5:605.

⁶³ Samuel Palmer and Edmund Calamy, *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (London: J. Cundee, Ivy-Lane, 1802), 21.

⁶⁴ Brian H. Cosby, *Suffering and Sovereignty: John Flavel and the Puritans on Afflictive Providence* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 4.

him as a deeply experienced Christian and therefore as one well fitted to lead us in such experimental subjects as communion with God, prayer, and the life of faith.”⁶⁵ Having felt the wounds of affliction, Flavel’s experience equipped him to provide compassionate care to the suffering.

Second, Flavel exhibited compassion in his pastoral care for people’s spiritual welfare and physical wellbeing. For example, after a particularly arduous journey, a close friend was unable to “prevail with him” to forgo preaching. “His bowels of compassion to needy and perishing souls made him overlook all considerations of himself.”⁶⁶ Like the great shepherd of the sheep who had compassion on the multitudes, Flavel felt deeply burdened for the many distresses, wanderings, and disappointments experienced by the sheep. He tenderly writes, “It makes my heart melt within me, and my compassions for you flow together.”⁶⁷ Increase Mather lamented the passing of Flavel and commended him as a compassionate gift to his congregation at Dartmouth. “And now my soul bleeds to look on the dear flock of God, which are as sheep without a shepherd. The Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, have compassion on them, and give them a shepherd like to his blessed servant Flavel, who did for many years feed them with knowledge, and with understanding.”⁶⁸ Calamy reports that Flavel “was very benevolent and charitable to the poor.”⁶⁹ He also gave of his resources for students preparing for the ministry. Flavel

⁶⁵ Iain H. Murray, “John Flavel,” *Banner of Truth USA*, February 8, 2008, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2008/john-flavel/>.

⁶⁶ “The Life of John Flavel,” in *Works*, 1:xiv.

⁶⁷ John Flavel, *Antipharacum Saluberrimum, or A Serious and Seasonable Caveat to all the Saints in this Hour of Temptation*, in *Works*, 4:517. To multiply examples, Flavel states it similarly in *England’s Duty*: “I cannot but look upon this assembly with fear, jealousy, and compassion. I am afraid there be many of you in this wretched case, men and women, that hold the truths of God in unrighteousness, though the wrath of God be revealed from heaven against all them that do so.” Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:298.

⁶⁸ John Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:140.

⁶⁹ Palmer and Calamy, *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*, 21.

was indeed a compassionate shepherd with a compassionate heart, who earnestly proclaimed God's compassion in Christ.

Third, Flavel's teaching typifies a decidedly pastoral approach to ministry, aimed at caring for those who struggle in a fallen world. Though theologically robust, Flavel's teaching is not intellectually cold. He earnestly attends to the needs and cares of the sheep, knowledgeably leading them to greater fidelity and commitment to the duties of faith.⁷⁰ Vickers describes Flavel as a man of "unusual theological sagacity combined with a warm-hearted pastoral concern."⁷¹ Allen notes that Flavel, "like his Lord, was a tender-hearted pastor. He writes with a gentleness and proven authority on issues related to the Christian life. He understood his people well and knew how their minds worked and the kind of things that brought them sorrow and made them shed tears."⁷² Often described as practical divinity, Flavel's teaching "connected principle with practice."⁷³ Indeed, he was a minister by occupation and a pastor by heart. He writes, "My dear kinsman, my flesh and my blood; my soul thirsteth for your salvation, and the salvation of your family."⁷⁴ Flavel deeply cared for the sheep and grieved over unbelief, thoughtfully explaining and practically applying the truth of Scripture to the salvation and sanctification of souls.

Fourth, Flavel was a pre-modern man. While much of contemporary society recoils at the notion that Puritanism has anything to say to modern man, some scholars

⁷⁰ Beeke notes that "Flavel's power as a preacher came out of his depth of spiritual experience. He spent many hours in meditation and self-examination." Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 249.

⁷¹ Douglas Vickers, "The Works of John Flavel," *Westminster Theological Journal* 32, no. 1 (November 1969): 92–96.

⁷² Lewis Allen, introduction to *All Things Made New*, by John Flavel (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2017), viii.

⁷³ Peter Beck, "The Fountain of Life: The Excellency of Christ in the Preaching of John Flavel," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 5, no. 1 (January 2013): 44.

⁷⁴ "The Life of John Flavel," in *Works*, 1:xviii.

argue that there is much to learn from these pre-modern thinkers. Gleason and Kopic, for example, maintain that while there is a difficulty that accompanies reading classic texts, they impart a significant advantage because the authors exist outside the norms and current circumstances of a contemporary audience.⁷⁵ Appealing to C. S. Lewis, they affirm that if readers must choose between old and new books, they should choose the old, for they have been tested by time and are not subject to the dangers of an exclusive contemporary diet.⁷⁶ Likewise, Vickers writes, “In Flavel we have once again an opportunity to learn, if we will, the sounder answers from a sounder age to problems of life we have covered over and forgotten, rather than faced and solved.”⁷⁷ Standing on the cusp of the Enlightenment, Flavel precedes the profound epistemological shifts of the eighteenth century—shifts that decisively altered the trajectory of the western worldview. In sum, Flavel stands outside the fog, poised to provide an alternative vision of compassion than that afforded by a blind submission to modern philosophy and psychology.

Lexicography

Flavel habitually employs a constellation of words with overlapping semantic significance that describe the compassion of Christ and his mystical body, the church. Certainly, one cannot read through Flavel’s preaching and teaching without encountering them, as they are deployed at the very beginning of his theology from the lofty Christological peaks of the covenant of redemption and the mediatorial glory of the pre-incarnate Christ.⁷⁸ His nomenclature, rather diverse, is often blended together: sympathy,

⁷⁵ Kelly M. Kopic and Randall C. Gleason, eds., *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 33.

⁷⁶ C. S. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books,” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 201.

⁷⁷ Vickers, “The Works of John Flavel,” 94.

⁷⁸ Speaking of the covenant of redemption and the agreement from eternity between the Father

pity, compassion, bowels, mercy, affection, tenderness, bowels of compassion, bowels of mercy, tender compassion, compassionate tenderness, tender-hearted, tenderly sensible, and tender-bearing. He collects, discharges, and strings these terms together throughout his writings, predominately describing the one who is preeminently tender-hearted, the God-man Jesus Christ.

Consideration of Flavel's nomenclature demonstrates the pervasiveness of compassion in his teaching. Three caveats should be noted, however. First, nowhere in his works does Flavel deliver specific and succinct definitions for these terms. Instead, definitional clarity relies on lexical data (e.g. in the distinction in Flavel's usage between the terms 'sympathy' and 'compassion' which, semantically would seem to be rooted in the equivalent Greek and Latin terms), Flavel's immediate literary context, as well as the broader historical context of his contemporaries. Second, given the frequency with which he uses these terms, it is impossible to consider every instance. Yet, a survey of the majority provides profitable distinctions, suitable toward gaining an understanding of the term's scope and sense. Last, those searching for universal and fixed definitions for any form of fellow feeling will inevitably be disappointed.⁷⁹ Maintaining a realistic picture includes acknowledging semantic imprecision, multiple changes in definitions over time, and contemporary disagreement as to the nature of fellow feeling.⁸⁰ An additional

and the Son, Flavel writes, "The external cause of that satisfaction, which the Father decreed, and the Son made, was the miserable state we were in, upon the account of our sins, which justly deserved eternal punishment, and bound us over unto it: we being in this forlorn condition, the God of mercy had compassion on us, and for our sakes, the Son of God underwent all that punishment which we deserved to suffer; in order that we might be restored to our first happiness." Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:54–55.

⁷⁹ While antiquated for modern readers, the term fellow feeling was used freely in the seventeenth century. Though Flavel never uses the term, his Puritan contemporaries do utilize it at times. Flavel, however, does use the term 'fellows' to describe believers who now have fellowship with God by way of union with Christ. The concept denotes a relationship beyond that of neighbor or that of fellow man, but one of commonality, partnership and sharing between persons. Flavel writes, "The saints' dignity, which consists in this, that they are Christ's fellows. The Hebrew word is very full and copious, and is translated 'consorts, companions, copartners, partakers: or, as ours read it, fellows:' i.e. such as are partakers with him in the anointing of the Spirit, who do, in their measure, receive the same Spirit." Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:141.

⁸⁰ Part of the definitional ambiguity consists in classic and contemporary writers seemingly

challenge is that these concepts contain senses that have been expressed across several languages and funneled into Christian theology through a myriad of authors.

Compassion. Beginning with the Latin lexical data, two words are commonly connected to the English term “compassion.”⁸¹ The first is *compassio*, which serves as the direct source of the English equivalent. Lewis and Short describe it as a later ecclesiastical term; the nominal form *compassio* defined as “fellow-suffering” or “fellow-feeling,” while the verbal form *compatior* means “to suffer with one.”⁸² In Latin, the prepositional prefix has been added to another term.⁸³ Latham reports that the noun *passio* denotes “passion” or “martyrdom,” while the verb denotes “to suffer” or “to suffer martyrdom.”⁸⁴ The word connotes a suffering together with another or participation in suffering. Latham acknowledges the suitability of sympathy as a translation for *compatior*, meaning “to sympathize.”⁸⁵ While *compassio* is not a transliteration of the Greek word *συμπάθεια*, it does exist as an etymological equivalent to the Greek term.

The second term is *miser cordia*. It has its roots in classical Latin, and it appears in both Latin and Greek mythology as the goddess of pity or compassion (ἔλεος

synonymous characterization of all these words, casually stringing them together without concern for precision. Take, for example, the objection that Goodwin raises regarding the affectedness of the ascended Christ: “and having clothed his human nature with so great a glory, that therefore he cannot now pity us, as he did when he dwelt among us here below, nor be so feelingly affected and touched with our miseries, as to be tenderly moved to compassionate and commiserate us, so he is not now capable of a feeling of grief, and so not of a fellow-feeling or sympathizing with us.” Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ*, 51.

⁸¹ Neither Latin term appears in Flavel’s writings, only the English equivalents.

⁸² Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A New Latin Dictionary*, ed. E.A. Andrews (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), <http://archive.org/details/LewisAndShortANewLatinDictionary>, 387.

⁸³ A reliance on etymology alone exposes the interpreter to an exegetical danger, a root fallacy that presumes a word’s meaning derives solely from its component parts. Carson writes, “One of the most enduring of errors, the root fallacy presupposes that every word actually has a meaning bound up with its shape or its components. In this view meaning is determined by etymology; that is, by the root or roots of a word.” D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 28.

⁸⁴ R. E. Latham, ed., *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources* (London: British Academy, 1965), 334–335.

⁸⁵ Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List*, 100.

in Greek). The term is closely aligned with the concept of mercy. Muller defines it as mercy or compassion, “specifically, the *misericordia Dei*, or mercy of God, according to which God has compassion on his fallen creatures in their inability to return to him; one of the affections of the divine will.”⁸⁶ Lewis and Short list its meaning as tender-heartedness, pity, compassion, or mercy.⁸⁷ Likewise, Latham reports that the term means mercy, providing an example of food allowances for the poor.⁸⁸ The etymological construction of the word consists of *miseria*, meaning wretchedness or misery, and *cor*, meaning heart or the seat of feeling.⁸⁹ As a historical example, the *misericorde* was a small dagger in the Middle Ages, thin enough to pierce through a knight’s armor. It was used to deliver a merciful blow to someone injured beyond healing.⁹⁰ Notably, the Clementine Vulgate translates ἔλεος and its cognates with the Latin *misericordia*, while translating all three New Testament verses containing the Greek word συμπάθεια with some cognate of *compassio*.⁹¹

The New Testament nomenclature reveals a greater diversity of words associated with compassion. Momentarily deferring discussion on συμπάθεια, several pertinent terms related to compassion include ἔλεος, οἶκτος, σπλαγχνά, and συμπάσχω.⁹²

⁸⁶ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 221.

⁸⁷ Lewis and Short, *A New Latin Dictionary*, 1150.

⁸⁸ Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List*, 300.

⁸⁹ Lewis and Short, *A New Latin Dictionary*, 468.

⁹⁰ Jim Bradbury, *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Warfare* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 246.

⁹¹ The Vulgate also uses *compassio* for two other notable New Testament passages. In 1 Corinthians 12:26, Paul uses πάσχω and συμπάσχω, meaning to suffer or suffer with another. “If one member suffers, all suffer together.” The same situation is true for Romans 8:17, with the exception of suffering with Christ instead of suffering with the other parts of the body: “and if children, their heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

⁹² Brown reports: “In their original use *eleos* refers to the feeling of pity, *oiktirmos*, and especially its root *oiktos*, to the exclamation of pity at the sight of another’s ill-fortune, and *splanchna* to the seat of the emotions, the inward parts of what today would be called the heart. The corresponding verbs in the active express these feelings shown in the sense of to help, feel pity, show mercy; where they are

Given the enormous amount of territory covered by these words, general definitions will provide a sufficient point of reference. Kittel reports that ἔλεος was first used as “the emotion roused by contact with an affliction which comes undeservedly on someone else. . . . this emotion is an ἔλεειν which includes the elements of both awe and mercy.”⁹³ While “ἔλεος denotes the emotion of compassion or mercy, οἰκτος is in the first instance grief or lamentation, especially lamentation at the misfortune or death of a man, then often sympathetic lamentation.”⁹⁴ Paul uses a cognate of οἰκτος in Philippians 2:1, to denote heartfelt sympathy for others: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and *sympathy*.” While early Greek usage almost exclusively uses σπλάγχνα to refer to the inward parts (or organs) of a sacrifice, later Jewish and early Christian sources use the term as the seat of heart-felt mercy.⁹⁵ It maintains a more direct correspondence with the English than other terms. The Puritans often use the word “bowels.” Less important, the rarely used συμπάσχω (Rom 8:17 and 1 Cor 12:26), or “to suffer with,” does not denote sympathy whereby one shares in another’s emotional loss; rather, it means that members of a community share and suffer a similar loss.⁹⁶

An examination of Flavel’s works suggests that he regards compassion as a general disposition (inherent quality) or act of goodness toward the afflicted. He explains that the psalmist (Psalm 57:2) pleads for mercy based on the nature of “a compassionate

used in the passive, they express the experience of these emotions.” Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 593.

⁹³ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 477.

⁹⁴ Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5:159.

⁹⁵ Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:549.

⁹⁶ Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5:925.

God, who will not expose any that take shelter under his wings.”⁹⁷ Elsewhere, Flavel explains the nature of God by declaring that the door of mercy is not shut to sinners: “And herein the merciful and compassionate nature of God is eminently discovered, in hasting to open the door of hope, almost as soon as the evil of sin is opened.”⁹⁸ God’s compassionate nature leads him to compassionate acts towards those who suffer, especially those who are wearied by the weight of sin. “The tender mother draws not out her aching breast with such delight to her hungry crying child, as the Lord doth his mercy and compassion to broken-hearted and hungry sinners.”⁹⁹

Furthermore, compassion tends to function as an umbrella concept with variegated use in Flavel’s teaching. He aligns the notion of compassion with mercy, tenderness, and sympathy. While all these notions express God’s compassionate nature, Flavel attributes these qualities to humanity, made in the image of God. He considers compassion to be an effect or fruit of love.¹⁰⁰ Though he does not sever them from one another, Flavel makes a distinction between goodness and compassion based on their objects. While God’s goodness may be expressed to those who are well (happy or prospering), his compassion concerns specifically the miserable, afflicted, or broken.¹⁰¹ Given that the object of compassion is those who are suffering, it stands to reason that Flavel devotes significant pastoral attention to personal affliction.

The extent of Flavel’s teaching on suffering cannot be understated. Treated in numerous works, *A Token for Mourners*, *The Balm of the Covenant Applied to Bleeding*

⁹⁷ John Flavel, *Divine Conduct, or The Mystery of Providence*, in *Works*, 4:244.

⁹⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:313.

⁹⁹ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:154.

¹⁰⁰ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:222. In discussion of love, Flavel argues that love should compel believers to do good to all men, especially the household of faith.

¹⁰¹ Flavel, *Exposition of the Assembly’s Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:155.

Wounds of Afflicted Saints, and Preparations for Suffering, Or The Best Work in the Worst Times, Flavel applies mature pastoral care that explains God’s afflictive providences as sanctified afflictions, which are for his glory and the blessing of his saints. Having helpfully organized Flavel’s teaching on the nature and purpose of suffering, Cosby asserts that Flavel sees the origin of suffering as rooted in the fall of Adam (Gen. 3).¹⁰² God ordains the suffering of his people for loving ends: “While affliction and suffering come upon the unbeliever as signs and effects of his judgment and wrath, they come upon the elect as loving discipline with a design to produce greater godliness.”¹⁰³ In *Husbandry Spiritualized*, Flavel compares this to the threshing of corn: “Though the husbandman lays on, and beats his corn as if he was angry with it, yet he loves and highly prizes it; and though God strike and afflict his people, yet he sets a great value upon them; and it is equally absurd to infer God’s hatred to his people from his afflicting of them.”¹⁰⁴ Much of Flavel’s pastoral care includes the proper preparation for and response to God’s afflictive providences.¹⁰⁵

Appealing to Ann Thompson’s *The Art of Suffering*, Cosby asserts that Flavel’s understanding of suffering may be categorized into external, internal, and spiritual suffering, with the greater affliction being that which is inward.¹⁰⁶ While external suffering includes pain, persecution, death, and natural disasters, internal

¹⁰² Afflictions themselves are an evil, but they are not necessarily morally and intrinsically evil. John Flavel, *Navigation Spiritualized: A New Compass for Seamen*, in *Works*, 5:251.

¹⁰³ Brian Cosby, “The Theology of Suffering and Sovereignty as Seen in the Writings and Ministry of John Flavel, c.1630–1691” (PhD diss., Australian College of Theology, 2012), 148–49.

¹⁰⁴ Flavel, *Navigation Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:133.

¹⁰⁵ Cosby suggests eight reasons why God ordains suffering for the elect: to mortify sin, to produce godliness, to reveal God’s character, to prize the eternal, to produce sincere faith, to encourage the mans of grace, to bear witness to God’s glory, and to cultivate communion with Christ. Cosby, “The Theology of Suffering and Sovereignty as Seen in the Writings and Ministry of John Flavel, c.1630–1691,” 150–51.

¹⁰⁶ Ann Thompson, *The Art of Suffering and the Impact of Seventeenth-Century Anti-Providential Thought* (Aldershot Hampshire, England: Routledge, 2003), 2–5.

suffering includes grief, sorrow, and despair. Admitting that inner and spiritual suffering are often linked, Cosby asserts that “spiritual suffering is of a different degree and category than the typical external and internal sufferings in this world. . . . Flavel understood spiritual oppression and a deadness of faith foundational to the experience of internal suffering.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Flavel taught that God looks compassionately upon all forms of suffering.¹⁰⁸ Regarding the physical and external, he describes God as exceedingly tender and full of pity, not only feeding and clothing his enemies, but much more so his children.¹⁰⁹ Recounting a tragic sea voyage that ultimately resulted in several amputations of sailors’ limbs, Flavel writes that they were shown compassion by those who rescued them.¹¹⁰ Notwithstanding, Flavel places a clear and heavy accent on internal suffering and spiritual destitution.¹¹¹ “Soul mercies,” writes Flavel, “are the best mercies.”¹¹² Considering the mission of Christ, “the merciful God hath, in his abundant

¹⁰⁷ Cosby, “The Theology of Suffering and Sovereignty as Seen in the Writings and Ministry of John Flavel, c.1630–1691,” 131. Spiritual sufferings might be aptly characterized as those that deal with the heart’s affections, posture towards God and the resulting responses towards physical and inner suffering. Cosby quotes *A Token for Mourners* as an example: “Sure then thou hast more reason to lament thy dead heart, than thy dead friend. . . . To lose the heavenly warmth and spiritual liveliness of thy affections, is undoubtedly a far more considerable loss, than to lose the wife of thy bosom, or the sweetest child that ever a tender parent laid in the grave.” Flavel, *A Token for Mourners*, in *Works*, 5:619. Essentially, spiritual soundness mediates the experiences of internal affliction naturally experienced by living in a fallen world.

¹⁰⁸ Lovelace argues that Puritanism generally was concerned for the both the physical needs of others as well as their spiritual needs. “Unlike the twentieth century revivalism that is its ultimate descendant, Puritan piety was oddly enough just as concerned about the physical welfare of humans as it was about their redemption.” Richard C. Lovelace, “Puritan Spirituality: The Search for a Rightly Reformed Church,” in *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*, vol. 18, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 317.

¹⁰⁹ John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed, or The Great Work of a Christian Explained and Applied*, in *Works*, 5:461.

¹¹⁰ John Flavel, *A Faithful and Succinct Narrative of Some Late and Wonderful Sea-Deliverances*, in *Works*, 4:512.

¹¹¹ This is the same point Warfield makes in his essay on the emotional life of Christ: “It was not merely the physical ills of life, however—want and disease and death—which called out our Lord’s compassion. These ills were rather looked upon by him as themselves rooted in spiritual destitution. And it was this spiritual destitution which most deeply moved his pity.” Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “The Emotional Life of Our Lord,” in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2015), 98.

¹¹² John Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized or, The Heavenly Use of Earthly Things*, in *Works*, 5:56. “O what large catalogues of experiences do the saints carry to heaven with them, for their various exercise, dangers, trials, and marvelous preservations and deliverances out of all! And yet all these troubles

compassion to the perishing world, sent a physician from heaven, and given him his orders under the great seal of heaven for his office.”¹¹³ In sum, God’s compassion is evident in Christ’s coming into the world that he might have compassion on his people in all their afflictions.

Mercy. Flavel often describes compassion as mercy. While at times he uses the term to describe a disposition of patience and forgiveness, he generally uses it to describe an act of deliverance or undeserved kindness. Flavel mentions that “all our protection, provision, and comforts in this world are the fruits of mercy.”¹¹⁴ They are an undeserved kindness. Flavel writes, Christ “is free and undeserved mercy, called upon that account, The gift of God . . . And to shew how free this gift was, God gave him to us when we were enemies . . . Needs must that mercy be free, which is given, not only to the undeserving, but to the ill-deserving.”¹¹⁵ Flavel often pairs the mercy of God with compassion, effectively communicating a degree of synonymy between the terms.¹¹⁶ Mercy may also be said to born out of a compassionate spirit.

Tenderness. Flavel uses the term “tenderness” to describe an object that is impressionable, such as a baby or lamb. He also uses it to describe the gentle and earnest manner by which one attends to the needs of others. “The most melting and tender

without, are nothing to those within them.” Flavel, *Navigation Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:219. “Life indeed is more worth than all the world, but my soul is more worth than ten thousand lives.” Flavel, *Navigation Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:263. The reason that Flavel views internal suffering greater than external suffering revolves around the value he places on the soul over the body. The body is but the case or garment in which the soul rests. While the soul may endure bodily suffering, a crushed soul is much more difficult to bear. Spiritual sufferings are the greatest of sufferings for they determine one’s state of eternity.

¹¹³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:190.

¹¹⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:203.

¹¹⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:205.

¹¹⁶ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:118. “His mercies and compassions never failed when the vilest of sinners came to him in the way of repentance and faith.”

compassions of a mother to her sucking child, are but cruelty in comparison with divine tenderness and mercy.”¹¹⁷ While the term “tenderness” can denote the care that is given to those who are weak, Flavel also utilizes it to describe the divine posture towards those who are suffering, especially under the weight of sin. In sum, compassion breeds tenderness given that those who suffer are fragile and vulnerable.

The tender compassion of God is said to flow from the bowels. While Flavel often employs the phrase *bowels of compassion*, he also utilizes *bowels of mercy*, *bowels of commiseration*, or *bowels of affection*. He uses the term “bowels” as a synonym for the heart. In describing the diligence of Christ in finishing the work of redemption, Flavel states, “his heart was intently set upon it (Ps 4:8). ‘Thy law is in the midst of my heart,’ or bowels.”¹¹⁸ In this way, tenderness (or compassion) may be said to be situated in (or flow from) his bowels.

Sympathy. Flavel’s understanding of sympathy reflects a pre-modern concept. In classical literature, sympathy “is from the time of Aristotle used first for him ‘who has the same *πάθος*,’ ‘who is affected like another by the same sufferings, impressions, emotions,’ or ‘who suffers, experiences etc. the same as another,’ later one ‘who has fellow-feeling, sympathy with another.’”¹¹⁹ Mirguet lists examples from Dionysius, Plutarch, Polybius, and Josephus, for whom sympathy describes affection between family members and the emotional response to those who are suffering: “Unrelated people become like the mourners themselves; they experience their grief as if they were directly

¹¹⁷ John Flavel, *Twelve Sacramental Meditations Upon Select Places of Scripture, to Prepare Believers for the Ordinance of the Lord's Supper*, in *Works*, 6:420.

¹¹⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:407. Flavel will use the terms as a hendiadys when he writes, “Let this consideration work upon the hearts, and bowels of all serious Christians, to pity, and help those that are like to perish under this temptation.” Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 3:186.

¹¹⁹ Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5:935.

impacted by the loss.”¹²⁰ The root word *πάθος* shares a history with *πάσχω* and commonly denotes some type of mood, feeling, or emotion.¹²¹ In the New Testament, the word denotes “that which is endured or experienced, suffering.”¹²² With the prefix, the sense of the word is to experience, feel, or suffer with another. In the New Testament, there are but three appearances of the Greek word *συμπάθεια* or its cognates: Hebrews 4:15; 10:34; and 1 Peter 3:8, probably due to the availability of alternative terms such as *ἔλεος*, *οἶκτος*, and *σπλάγχνα*.¹²³ Indeed, as stated previously, there is significant semantic overlap between these various concepts.

Interestingly, an exclusive psychological or interpersonal use of the term “sympathy” is anachronistic. Chris Meyns concurs, “Today, the concept of sympathy finds its main application in the domain of psychology. It is used to mark situations in which someone feels compassion for another, or when people share a common feeling. . . . From a historical perspective, such a segregation of the domain of human or animal action when considering sympathy is an anomaly.”¹²⁴ In the classical world, sympathy did not function as a psychological notion, but as a philosophical concept related to cosmology. Preoccupied with questions regarding unity in diversity, the Stoics employed the notion of sympathy to describe various interconnected phenomena such as the influence of the heavenly bodies on the seas of the earth, the earth’s climate and its effects on the human mind, the mutual reverberation of strings on musical instruments,

¹²⁰ Françoise Mirguet, *An Early History of Compassion: Emotion and Imagination in Hellenistic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 33.

¹²¹ Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5:926.

¹²² William Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 607.

¹²³ Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5:935.

¹²⁴ Chris Meyns, “Sympathetic Action in the Seventeenth Century: Human and Natural,” *Philosophical Explorations* 21, no. 1 (March 2018): 60.

and the relationship between the body and the soul.¹²⁵ Indeed, Emilson characterizes the stoic conception of *συμπάθεια* as “cosmic sympathy.”¹²⁶ Picking up these themes in neo-Platonic thought, Plotinus asserts that, as a result of the emanation in the hierarchy of being, there exists a like-nature and interconnectedness that produces a sympathy (or influenced affectability) between all things. “This being so,” for Plotinus, “it is natural to conjecture that *συμπάθεια* holds between similar things somehow because they are linked through a common origin and are therefore in a sense ‘closer’ to one another than dissimilar things.”¹²⁷

On this basis, Schliesser identifies five features that are presupposed in most uses of the term sympathy: (1) it refers to a distant action; (2) it presumes a “like nature,” often within the same being or kind; (3) its cause is invisible; (4) its effect is instantaneous; and (5) it entails a bidirectional influence in the sympathetic relationship.¹²⁸ For example, regarding mutual affectability, the Greek physician Galen acknowledges the vulnerability of the human body due to its sympathetic affections; parts of the body hurt as a result of the harm suffered in another part.¹²⁹ Because Galen did not affirm the immateriality of the soul, he did not perceive any sympathy between the body and the soul. Beginning with Aristotle, however, philosophers have “described what they

¹²⁵ Eric Schliesser, ed., *Sympathy: A History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 22–23.

¹²⁶ Emilson summarizes stoic thought with respect to cosmic sympathy: “The Stoic notion of cosmic *sympatheia* is perhaps best elucidated as an inference from their belief that the cosmos is an organism. Just as in the case of an ordinary organism different parts may be so connected that an affection in one place leads to an affection in another—a bad stomach may for instance be accompanied by a headache though the lungs and the other parts in between are left quite unaffected.” Schliesser, *Sympathy*, 39.

¹²⁷ Schliesser, *Sympathy*, 54–55.

¹²⁸ Schliesser, *Sympathy*, 7–9.

¹²⁹ This notion is illustrated in Galen’s thought: “It is only because Galen has such a command of the nervous system that he understands, for example, why a patient who has suffered a fall loses command over his legs and his voice: whereas the other physicians apply treatment to the affected parts—legs and voice—Galen recognizes that a nerve in the spine has been damaged and directs his therapies there.” Schliesser, 67–68.

saw as the soul's ability to transmit its suffering to the body and vice versa in terms of sympathy."¹³⁰ Regarding the presupposition of a "like nature," Schliesser describes this feature of sympathy as the "likeness principle, or the LP. It is a metaphysical background commitment that is presupposed in nearly all applications of the concept."¹³¹ This metaphysical commitment, coupled with the principle of mutual affectability, offers Greek philosophy a paradigm to explain the phenomena of influence in the world around them, especially between entities that appear distant or dissimilar.

Understandably, this concept of sympathy experienced a revival during the Renaissance, inspired by the rediscovery of Greek philosophy. The Renaissance philosophers employed the notion of sympathy in various disciplines, including medicine, music, mathematics, and astrology. For example, Girolamo Fracastoro, familiar with the works of Pliny and Galen, applied sympathy to medicine. He observed that there was "an accord between the parts of the whole of a body such that if one part is struck . . . the density (a quality of the body) will alter throughout that body."¹³² In music, Gerbino describes the viol as having sympathetic strings. When one string vibrates, another resonates sympathetically. Gerbino quotes Francis Bacon: "It was devised, that a viol should have a lay of wire-strings below, as close to the belly as a lute, and then the strings of guts mounted upon a bridge, as in ordinary viols; to the end that by his means the upper strings stricken should make the lower resound by sympathy, and so make the music the better."¹³³

The Puritans assimilated this classically inspired Renaissance conceptualization of sympathy into their writings, often importing the semantic freight

¹³⁰ Schliesser, *Sympathy*, 68.

¹³¹ Schliesser, *Sympathy*, 7.

¹³² Schliesser, *Sympathy*, 83.

¹³³ Schliesser, *Sympathy*, 103.

illustratively or analogously to describe theological truths. This is seen, for example, in John Owen’s description of sanctification:

The power and growth of any lust or corruption, and a compliance from it with temptations, which is inseparable from the prevalency of any sin in us, lies directly against this process. . . . A disease in any one of the vitals, or principal parts of the body, weakens not only the part wherein it is, but the whole body itself, and vitiates the whole constitution by a sympathy of parts; and any particular lust indulged unto vitiates the whole spiritual health, and weakens the soul in all duties of obedience.¹³⁴

Using the analogy of the body, Owen goes so far as to assert that sympathy is a law (or principle) in creation. Speaking of Christ’s affectedness towards his body, he writes, “And as when one member suffers, all the members do suffer; so the many members sinning and suffering, he according unto the laws of sympathy in the same body took the sorrows or labours of the suffering members on him, and made all their infirmities their own.”¹³⁵ In the *Heart of Christ*, Goodwin also describes sympathy as a law of nature.¹³⁶

Sibbes also applies this law of sympathy between body and soul, admitting that external afflictions work upon the inward man for good and ill: “This is most felt in the sudden distresses which come upon the soul as a torrent or land-flood, and especially in bodily sicknesses which, by reason of the sympathy between the soul and the body, work upon

¹³⁴ John Owen, *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit, The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Gould, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 405. Additionally, Owen will also appeal to the notion of sympathy to describe the orderliness of God’s creation, acknowledging its harmony, causality, and agreement: “There is an harmony, a suitableness of one thing unto another, in all the works of creation. Yet we see that it is not perfectly nor absolutely discoverable unto the wisest and most diligent of men. How far are they from an agreement about the order and motions of the heavenly bodies, of the sympathies and qualities of sundry things here below, in the relation of causality and efficiency between one thing and another!” John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Gould, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 50.

¹³⁵ Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Gould, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 177.

¹³⁶ Speaking of Esther’s torment at seeing her kindred suffer and face such a great evil, Goodwin writes, “She considered but her relation, and how doth it work in her veins by a sympathy of blood! Now much more doth this hold good of husband and wife, for they are in a nearer relation yet. Let the wife have been one that was poor and mean, fallen into sickness, etc., and let the husband be as great and glorious as Solomon in all his royalty all mankind would cry shame on such a man, if he should not now own his wife, and be a husband in all love and respect to her still. But beyond all these relations, the relation of head and members . . . And it is the *law of nature*, that ‘if one member be honoured, all the members are to rejoice with it’ (1 Cor. 12:26); ‘and if one member suffer, all the rest are to suffer with it.’” Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ*, 80–81.

the soul so far as to hinder not only the spiritual, but often the natural acts.”¹³⁷ The Puritans often use this sense of sympathy to describe suffering together within a relational unity. Owen writes, “The word ‘touched’ comes exceedingly short of expressing the original word; it is *συμπάθῃσαι* —to suffer together. . . . Whatever be our infirmities, so far as they are our temptations, he doth suffer with us under them, and compassionates us.”¹³⁸

Flavel uses the notion of sympathy to describe the state of “suffering with” another or “participating with” the suffering of another. In accord with the philosophical meaning of his day, Flavel’s conceptualization of sympathy implies some unity by which sympathy becomes an inherent consequence. By way of a musical analogy—similar to classical and Renaissance usage—he communicates comfort to grieving parents. He admits that there is “a tender sympathy in me with you under all your troubles, and make me say of every affliction which befalls you, Half’s mine. I find it is with our affections as with the strings of musical instruments exactly set at the same height, if one be touched, the other trembles, though it be at some distance.”¹³⁹ Given this classical-Renaissance framework of sympathy, it would make sense that Flavel considers it a debt (or duty), which people owe in their bonds of union. “Surely (my brethren) sympathy is a debt we owe to Christ mystical.”¹⁴⁰ While modern notions of sympathy (and empathy) become the means (or bonds) of unity and connectedness, Flavel sets the priority of some preceding connectedness or unity from which sympathy flows. Union is the foundation of sympathy. Comforting those distressed by the troubles of God’s people, he writes,

¹³⁷ Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed*, 13.

¹³⁸ John Owen, *On Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation, or The Saints Fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost Unfolded*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Gould, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 141.

¹³⁹ Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity*, in *Works*, 5:604.

¹⁴⁰ Flavel, *Navigation Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:276.

If you can fetch no comfort from any of the former arguments, then, in the last place, *Try whether you cannot draw some comfort out of your very troubles*. Surely this trouble of yours is a good argument of your integrity; union is the ground of sympathy; if you had some rich adventure in that ship, you would not tremble as you do, when it is in danger.¹⁴¹

Delaying a fuller treatment of Flavel's use of sympathy in his pastoral care, what distinctions can be drawn between Flavel's broader notion of compassion and the concept of sympathy?

First, while sympathy presupposes a preexisting relational unity from which it flows, compassion may be expressed toward those outside the bonds of union. While a husband may suffer sympathetically with his ill wife (unity of marriage), or a father with his heart-broken child (unity of family), compassion may be felt to those outside the bonds of unity. To be clear, this is not to say that relations and roles have no impact on the experience of compassion, especially in its intensity, but that, in sympathy, there exists a necessary relational commitment that in principle produces a mutual influence (i.e., what impacts one necessarily impacts the other). Essentially, they share in the pain together. Second, compassion and sympathy may be distinguished in direction. In Flavel's writing, compassion may be said to be a disposition *over* or *for* the suffering of another, while sympathy may be characterized as affectedness *with* the suffering of another. Third, Flavel's sense of sympathy appears to lessen the drive to help as opposed to compassion. Instead, the sharing (or commonality) of suffering in sympathy functions as the help. Fourth, sympathy supposes a mutual affectability between two entities while compassion may be described as a nature (or disposition) that leads to compassionate acts toward the afflicted.¹⁴² Fifth, while the objects of compassion appear to be exclusively associated with suffering, sympathy at times seems to function with a positive valence.

¹⁴¹ Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:450.

¹⁴² Importantly, Flavel never uses the notion of sympathy with the divine essence or attributes of God. God is not said to be mutually affected by man's suffering. Instead, God's compassionate nature leads him to compassionate works towards those burdened and suffering. Flavel applies the notion of sympathy and mutual affectedness with the body and the soul, the members of the body of Christ, and believers and Christ as their high priest.

Thus, Paul writes, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). In sum, sympathy functions as a form of compassion, nuanced (or technical) to describe an affectedness (especially in the face of suffering) within a prior unity.

Affection. The affections function as an integral part of Puritan psychology and spirituality. William Fenner characterizes the affections as the “forcible and sensible motions of the will, to a thing or from a thing, according as it is apprehended to be evil or to be good.”¹⁴³ Packer states that “the affections are the various dispositional ‘drives,’ positive and negative, with their emotional overtones—love, hope, hate, fear and so on—which elicit choices by drawing man to or repelling him from particular objects.”¹⁴⁴ Likewise, Yuille writes that the affections are “the inclination or disinclination of the soul to an object in accordance with the soul’s perception of that object as either desirous or odious.”¹⁴⁵ Bunyan notes that they are the “hands and arms of the soul; for they are they that take hold of, receive, and embrace what is liked by the soul.”¹⁴⁶ These inclinations of the soul, and their accompanying emotions, demonstrate the dynamic nature of Puritan spirituality, as the Puritans esteem them to be indispensable to the knowledge of Christ.

Flavel asserts that there are three faculties of the soul—the mind, the will, and the affections. He writes, “The soul of man is not only endued with an understanding and

¹⁴³ William Fenner, *A Treatise of the Affections, or, The Soul's Pulse Whereby a Christian May Know Whether He Be Living or Dying* (London, 1641), 10. Reynolds offers a similar definition, albeit more technical: “Passions are nothing else, but those natural, perfective, and unstrained motions of the creatures, unto that advancement of their natures, which they are by the wisdom, power, and providence of their Creator, in their own several spheres, and according to the proportion of their capacities, ordained to receive, by a regular inclination to those objects, whose goodness beareth a natural convenience or virtue of satisfaction unto them; or by an antipathy and aversion from those, which bearing a contrary to the good they desire, must needs be noxious and destructive, and by consequent, odious to their natures.” Edward Reynolds, *A Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soul of Man* (London, 1647), 32.

¹⁴⁴ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 195.

¹⁴⁵ Yuille, *Puritan Spirituality*, 72.

¹⁴⁶ John Bunyan, *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan: A Treatise of the Fear of God, The Greatness of the Soul, A Holy Life*, ed. Richard L. Greaves, vol. 9 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 147.

will, but also with various and affections and passions.”¹⁴⁷ Flavel goes on to acknowledge the duty of the affections in apprehending good for the happiness of the soul, the chief good being God himself:

They are originally designed and appointed for the happiness of man, in the promoting and securing its chiefest good, to which purpose they have a natural aptitude . . . The soul considered at a distance from God, its true rest and happiness, is furnished and provided with desire and hope to carry it on, and quicken its motion towards him. These are the arms it is to stretch out towards him, in a state of absence from him.¹⁴⁸

In addition to describing the affections as *arms*, he considers them analogous to *handles*, functioning as that apparatus of the soul by which temptation takes hold.¹⁴⁹ Flavel lists the various affections as hope, desire, love, delight, fear, and sorrow.¹⁵⁰ Yuille argues that Flavel’s conceptualization of the affections is clearly Augustinian, insofar as he identifies four primary motions of the soul—desire, fear, joy, and sorrow.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, Boone asserts that Fenner’s *A Treatise of the Affections* significantly influenced Flavel’s understanding of the affections despite, however, Fenner’s rejection of the affections as a separate faculty.¹⁵² Flavel recognizes the motivating power of the affections, regarding them as the reins which maintain a sensible sympathy with the heart, the seat of the affections.¹⁵³ As a result, the affections serve as influences and powers within the soul.

While originally created for the happiness of man, bringing the soul closer to

¹⁴⁷ John Flavel, *Pneumatologia: A Treatise on the Soul of Man*, in *Works*, 2:509.

¹⁴⁸ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:509.

¹⁴⁹ John Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings or, The Best Work in the Worst Times*, in *Works*, 6:62.

¹⁵⁰ Flavel also mentions “the rest,” indicating that he believed there were others as well. Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:497.

¹⁵¹ J. Stephen Yuille, *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel’s Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), 37.

¹⁵² Boone, *Puritan Evangelism*, 86–87.

¹⁵³ Flavel, *Twelve Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:389.

God in the enjoyment and blessedness of his presence, the affections are now corrupt. “But, alas, how are they corrupted and inverted by sin! The concupiscible appetite greedily fastens upon the creature, not upon God; and the irascible appetite is turned against holiness, not sin.”¹⁵⁴ Even so, Flavel argues that the affections render the soul marriageable to Christ. They make the soul “a fit subject to be wrought upon in a moral way of persuasions and allurements, in order to its union with Christ, (for by the affections, as Mr. Fenner rightly observes, the soul becomes marriageable or capable of being espoused to him).”¹⁵⁵ Upon union with Christ, the affections are put right because the right and chief good has been restored in the heart.¹⁵⁶

In Flavel’s estimation, the bonds of union—including the Spirit on God’s part and faith on man’s part—do not extirpate the affections. Instead, espousal to Christ reorders them, setting them in proper order in the process of sanctification. “As the power of sin misplaced and disordered all the affections, so sanctification reduces them again and sets them right . . . And thus you see how sanctification becomes the rectitude, health, and due temper of the soul.”¹⁵⁷ In sum, while the affections were created good, designed to apprehend God as the chief good, they have become disordered and corrupted by sin. It is only through the work of Christ, applied to a believer in union with him, that the affections are restored.

Given these particulars, what is the relationship between the affections and compassion? A survey of literature from Flavel’s generation reveals divergent views.

¹⁵⁴ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:510.

¹⁵⁵ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:510.

¹⁵⁶ This is not to say that Flavel held that the affectionate capacity could be fully restored in this life. Rather, it makes progress towards restoration, advancing towards holiness. “True it is, this cure is not perfected in this life; there are still some remains of the old diseases in the holiest souls, notwithstanding sin be dethroned from its dominion over them: but the cure is begun, and daily advances towards perfection, and at last will be complete, as will appear in the cure of the next evil of sin.” Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:193.

¹⁵⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:193.

Fenner, for instance, seems to classify compassion as a motion of the soul by way of pity. “The affections are the soul’s horses, that draw her as it were in a coach to the thing that she affects: a man is moved by his affections. By anger he moves out to revenge . . . by pity he moves out to relieve.”¹⁵⁸ Edward Reynolds, on the other hand, identifies five primary pairs of affections, excluding compassion. His pairings include love and hatred, desire and scorn, joy and sorrow, despair and hope, and boldness and fear.¹⁵⁹ In his work on communion with God, Owen describes pity and compassion as a third conjugal affection on the part of Christ. “Christ hath a fellow feeling with his saints in all their troubles, as a man hath with his own flesh. This act of the conjugal love of Christ relates to the many trials and pressures of afflictions that his saints meet withal here below.”¹⁶⁰

Notably, Flavel never outright classifies compassion or pity as an affection. In fact, he rarely discusses these concepts in the same context. Given his familiarity with Fenner’s treatise, it might be reasonable to conclude that he regarded compassion among the primary affections—a motion of the soul aimed at relief. Notwithstanding, his writing on the matter seems to favor a more conservative approach. Several clues suggest he held to two inferences regarding the affections and compassion. First, compassion (and similar forms of fellow-feeling) function as effects or manifestations of the affections. Flavel writes, “The soul manifests its dear love and affection to thy body, by its sympathy, and compassionate feeling of all its burdens.”¹⁶¹ In this way, compassion reveals the

¹⁵⁸ Fenner, *A Treatise of the Affections*, 4.

¹⁵⁹ Yuille argues that Reynolds’s conceptualization of the affections rests on Aristotelian and Augustinian thinking. He notes that Aristotle’s list includes anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, hatred, longing, and pity. Augustine, on the other hand, identifies four primary motions including desire, fear, joy, and sorrow. Yuille, *Puritan Spirituality*, 72–74. Even so, Reynolds’s treatise proposes various effects of these affections, including a tenderness born out of love. Edward Reynolds, *A Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soul of Man* (London, 1647), 98–110.

¹⁶⁰ John Owen, *On Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Gould, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 140.

¹⁶¹ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:591.

affections, particularly the objects of desire which fuel pity and sympathy. Elsewhere, Flavel exhorts his congregation to get affected with the misery of Zion or the church, maintaining a sense of tenderness and compassion for her distress.¹⁶² Second, if compassion is an effect (or manifestation) of the affections and the affections are ordered according to one's espousal to Christ, then covenant commitment functions as a primary interface in the right ordering of compassion. Essentially, union with Christ shapes the enterprise of compassion. As a result, Christ not only functions as the primary exemplar of compassion, but he also serves as the final arbiter regarding its nature and practice.

Christology

Flavel places Christ at the center of his theology and points to him as the superlative paragon of compassion. Two of his works, *The Fountain of Life* and *The Method of Grace*, sermons dedicated to advancing the person and work of Christ in the accomplishment and application of redemption, occupy the first third of his collected *Works*. Christ is also central in his other works. "I have spoken and written of many other subjects in my sermons and epistles," says Flavel, "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 of heaven, worthy our time and studies, this is it."¹⁶³ It is not simply that Flavel organizes his theology according to Christ, but that he (like the apostle Paul) desires that Christ serve as the organizing principle for his life and ministry. Flavel cites 1 Corinthians 2:2 as a foundational text: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." He writes, "Christ shall be the centre to which all

¹⁶² Flavel, *Antipharmacum Saluberrimum*, in *Works*, 4:551. Flavel provides other examples from scriptural narratives. For example, Joseph's affections could not be stifled upon seeing his family, his compassions welling up within him. "O see the mighty power of relation! No sooner doth he see his brethren, and understand their case, and the pining condition of Jacob, his father, but his bowels yearned, and his compassions rolled together for them; yea, he could not forbear, nor stifle his own affections." Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:92.

¹⁶³ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:33.

the lines of my ministry shall be drawn.”¹⁶⁴ He muses as to who or what is fairer than Christ: “And what fairer things than Christ! O fair sun, and fair moon, and fair stars, and fair flowers, and fair roses, and fair lilies, and fair creatures! But, O ten thousand, thousand times fairer Lord Jesus!”¹⁶⁵ Central to his belief and practice, Flavel devotes his time and energy to the proclamation of Christ, tenderly and tirelessly persuading men that their greatest hope and treasure is found in him alone.

Though not exhaustive, Flavel’s Christology is extensive.¹⁶⁶ Beck writes, “Flavel constructed a thorough-going Christology, working systematically through every major area of the doctrine: the excellency of Christ, his divine nature, the atonement, Christ’s present session at the right hand of God, and Christ’s future role as judge.”¹⁶⁷ The *Fountain of Life* alone considers Christ and the covenant of redemption, the nature of Christ’s incarnation, the three-fold office of Christ, the preparative acts of Christ before his death, an explication of his sayings while on the cross, and his resurrection and ascension. Additionally, Flavel’s teaching is not intended merely to communicate truths about Christ, but to challenge his congregation to apply Christ to their lives. Beck goes on to explain, “Flavel desired not only to fill the head with the profundity of Christ’s greatness but to use that knowledge to touch the heart and move the soul.”¹⁶⁸ He was a pastor who sought to apply Christ. As a result, his sermons, though theologically rich,

¹⁶⁴ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:33.

¹⁶⁵ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:xix.

¹⁶⁶ Cosby makes this point regarding Flavel’s Christology: “The admonition and application to the reader is twofold: study to know Christ more extensively and more intensively. According to Flavel, there are so many excellent properties in the person of Christ that any study of Him will not be exhaustive.” Brian H Cosby, “The Christology of John Flavel,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 4, no. 1 (January 2012): 120. Old provides a helpful synopsis: “What we find in this series is a very thorough Christology worked out in a most original and pictorial way. One might say it is not so much a systematic Christology as an expository Christology. It is not a speculative Christology; it is both practical and profound.” Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Volume 4*, 318.

¹⁶⁷ Beck, “The Fountain of Life,” 47.

¹⁶⁸ Beck, “The Fountain of Life,” 48.

were designed to conform souls to the pattern of Christ.¹⁶⁹ Last, Flavel believed that there were eternal consequences associated with the knowledge of Christ. Without Christ, a man remains in his sin and misery.¹⁷⁰ Flavel writes, “Temporal enjoyments, riches, honors, health, relations yield not a drop of true comfort without Christ.”¹⁷¹ As a repeated refrain in his works, he asserts that there are three great words or three weighty subjects that should demand our attention: Christ, the soul, and eternity.¹⁷² There is no hope beyond this life without Christ.

Flavel gives particular attention to Christ’s compassionate qualities—tenderness, sympathy, pity, and mercy. He describes the loveliness of Christ’s friendship as follows: “No friend sympathizes so tenderly with his friend in affliction, as Jesus Christ does with his friends.”¹⁷³ He goes on to describe Christ as the compassionate, great physician: “None so tender-hearted and sympathizing with sick souls as Jesus Christ; he is full of bowels of tender compassions to afflicted souls; he is one that can have

¹⁶⁹ Parker offers a balanced perspective of Flavel’s teaching, naming his Christology as one of his primary achievements: “What makes Flavel an author worth reading is that he seems to have combined the best features of all the ‘great’ Puritans. This is the reason he could arouse the world’s greatest minds with his intellectual precision and at the same time bring uneducated, sea-hardened sailors to their knees. Flavel did not have the intellectual power of John Owen, nor the poetic eloquence of John Bunyan, nor the encyclopedic comprehensiveness of Richard Baxter. But Flavel struck a healthy balance between these three and may be the best all-around English Puritan. What made Flavel great was his vision, estimate, and portrayal of the person and work of Christ. It was this feature which pervaded his writings.” Nathan Parker, “The Life and Influence of John Flavel,” *Banner of Truth USA*, February 26, 2019, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2019/life-and-influence-of-john-flavel/>.

¹⁷⁰ Vickers agrees. He writes about Flavel, “he always turns our attention to the greatness and glory of Christ, and he leaves us in no doubt at all about the realities of the need for redemption and the fact that man is in the estate of sin and misery in which a biblical anthropology clearly sees him.” Vickers, “The Works of John Flavel,” 93.

¹⁷¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:247.

¹⁷² Flavel repeats this refrain in several places in his works. For example, he writes in *Pneumatologia*, “If the affairs of this life be so indispensably necessary, and those of the world to come so indifferent; if you think that meat and drink, trade and business, wife and children are such great things, and Christ, the soul, and eternity, such little things . . . I may assure you, you will not be long of this mind. . . . How soon are all the mistakes of men in these matters rectified in a few moments after death! Rectified, I say, but not remedied; your opinion will be changed, but not your condition.” Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:236–37.

¹⁷³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:222.

compassion because he hath had experience.”¹⁷⁴ Flavel acknowledges Christ’s unrivaled holiness and tenderness: “For the more holy any is, the more he is grieved and afflicted for the sin of others; and the more tender any man is, the more he is pierced with beholding the miseries that lie upon others. And it is sure, never any heart more holy, or more sensible, tender and compassionate than Christ’s.”¹⁷⁵ Essentially, Flavel extols Christ as the quintessential paradigm of sympathy, compassion, and mercy.

Conclusion

The church’s call to put on compassion derives from the nature of God, who is compassionate toward his people. Revisiting the notion of compassion refreshes and reforms the church’s knowledge of God, challenges pockets of stoic intellectualism that denigrates human feeling, and encourages the afflicted as they struggle with the problem of evil. Despite the negative press the Puritans have received, they make a valuable contribution to any discussion of compassion. Their pastoral care offers a mature perspective into the nature of fellow-feeling amid suffering.

Standing outside the thinking of modernity, Flavel serves as a suitable guide in formulating a theology of compassion for pastoral care. As a man acquainted with suffering, Flavel’s life qualified him to apply compassionate care to his congregation in Dartmouth. His approach called the church to pity, sympathy, and compassion in moments of physical and spiritual pain, placing a particular emphasis on internal suffering and spiritual desertion. The pervasiveness of compassion in Flavel’s teaching emerges in a Christological pattern, focusing on the person of Christ, union with Christ, and the mystical body of Christ. These interconnected doctrines offer three perspectives that form a holistic theology of compassion. While the nature of God revealed in the

¹⁷⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:196.

¹⁷⁵ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:240.

person of Christ grounds the church's understanding of compassion, the church knows and receives God's compassions in union with Christ. In communion with God the church follows and applies compassion in discipleship.

While homiletically demonstrating the glory of Christ in his person and work, Flavel deploys numerous terms to describe God's compassion: mercy, tenderness, sympathy, pity, and affection. While they involve a response to the suffering of others, there are some distinctions among them. Flavel denotes mercy as active compassion in bestowing forgiveness, kindness, or deliverance. Tenderness, on the other hand, communicates a compassionate disposition. While compassion's orientation implies some type of posture and action *to* or *for* a sufferer, sympathy implies togetherness in the pain. More importantly, however, Flavel subscribes to a classical understanding of sympathy, which presupposes a union or bond that, by way of principle, fosters mutual sympathy between two entities. As a faculty for espousal, Flavel acknowledges the importance of setting one's affections on the chief good, Christ.

CHAPTER 2

THE PERSON OF CHRIST: COMPASSION IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Flavel asserts that no doctrine is more important than that of Christ. “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.”¹ Though diffused throughout his teaching, Flavel primarily depicts the person and work of Christ (namely, his mediatorial glory) in the *Fountain of Life*, described by one scholar as “arguably the most extensive study of the person and work of Christ published in English Puritanism during the seventeenth century.”² Affirming Chalcedonian and Westminster theology, Flavel acknowledges Christ as the eternal Son of God who became flesh, having two natures (divine and human) in one person.³ Organizationally, Flavel presents an organic unity between the person and work of Christ in the *Fountain of Life*, while in the *Method of*

¹ John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life: A Display of Christ in his Essential and Mediatorial Glory*, in *Works*, 1:34.

² Cosby qualifies his statement noting that there are other works that contend with Flavel’s *Fountain of Life*, including Thomas Goodwin’s *Christ set forth in his death, resurrection, ascension, sitting at God’s right hand intercession, as the cause of justification, object of justifying faith together with a treatise discovering the affectionate tenderness of Christs heart now in heaven, unto sinners on earth* (1642), John Owen’s *A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ* (1679), *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (1684), and *Meditations and Discourses Concerning the Glory of Christ Applied* (1691), and James Durham’s *Christ Crucified or The Marrow of the Gospel in 72 Sermons on Isaiah 53* (1683). Brian Cosby, “The Theology of Suffering and Sovereignty as Seen in the Writings and Ministry of John Flavel, c.1630–1691” (PhD diss., Australian College of Theology, 2012), 282. Additionally, Isaac Ambrose’s *Looking Unto Jesus: A View of the Everlasting Gospel* merits consideration, as it pastorally expounds and applies the person and work of Christ in over 600 pages.

³ Beeke and Jones state that most Puritan theology affirms Nicene and Chalcedonian Christology. However, taking Thomas Goodwin and John Owen as case studies, they note that the Puritans distinguished themselves in their Christology by their understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the person of Christ. Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 335–36.

Grace he primarily focuses on the application of redemption to the believer.⁴ Flavel also wedds his Christology to Trinitarianism and covenantal theology. He holds that the only redeemer of God's elect is the Son of God who compacted with the Father in the covenant of redemption to assume a true human nature and offer a perfect sacrifice on behalf of sinners. In Flavel's mind, the study of the person and work of Christ is the most noble subject, fundamental to all happiness, comforts, and duties, operating as the "marrow and kernel of all the scriptures."⁵

Additionally, the person and work of Christ are the fullest manifestation of the compassionate nature of God. Flavel admits as much while expounding the Gospel of John: "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."⁶ The Father's love led him to give the richest jewel in his cabinet to sinners, those who were by nature his enemies. Flavel gives four reasons why Christ is the highest manifestation of God's compassion. First, Christ is the Son of God, the radiance of his Father's glory, the exact image of his Father's compassionate nature. Second, Christ reveals the Father in his person and, therefore, he is the only means of attaining the knowledge of God. Third, Christ assumed a truly human nature, and demonstrated the Father's compassion, which he now extends to his people. Fourth, Christ functions as the chief and directing end of all the compassionate works of God. In sum, Christ functions as the "beam and standard" of compassion, theologically grounding Flavel's understanding of the nature and ends of compassion.

⁴ Jones utilizes the term "organic" in a similar way to describe the Christology of Thomas Goodwin. Goodwin, however, organizationally divides his theology between these two categories. Flavel integrates them under the rubric of his mediatorial work. Mark Jones, *Why Heaven Kissed Earth: The Christology of Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680)* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 178.

⁵ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:34.

⁶ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:64.

The Image of the Compassionate Father

For Flavel, there are three fundamental unions that comprise the Christian faith. The first is the essential union of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Godhead. The second is the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ in his person. The third is the mystical union between Christ and believers.⁷ In addition to these, Flavel speaks of a fourth union, namely, that which exists among the members of Christ's mystical body. For Flavel, the communication of benefits from one person to another implies communion, and communion in turn implies union.⁸ He asserts that there is a glorious, ineffable union between the Father and the Son. The Son is the express image of the Father.⁹ As the image of the Father, he is one essentially with the Father. The image also implies a near and dear affection. Flavel writes, "The Father is not only in Christ, in respect of dear affections, as one dear friend is in another, who is as his own soul; nor only essentially, in respect of the identity and sameness of nature and attributes . . . But he is in Christ also as Mediator, by communicating the fullness of the Godhead, which dwells in him as God-man."¹⁰ Beginning with the affectionate and essential aspects of the

⁷ The division is not exclusive to Flavel. Arrowsmith, for example, speaking of the incarnation as the deepest mystery of the world concludes that there are three unions: the substantial union of the three persons in the one nature and substance, the personal union of the two natures in one person, and the mystical union consisting of both persons and natures. Unlike Flavel, however, Arrowsmith includes elect angels in the mystical union, whereas Flavel asserts that mystical union exists as an honor bestowed singularly on elect mankind. Arrowsmith writes, "Thirdly, there is the union of several, both persons and natures, in one mystical body; and so, elect angels, and men, and Christ together, make but one Body, whereof Christ is the Head." John Arrowsmith, *Theanthrōpos, or, God-Man Being an Exposition upon the First Eighteen Verses of the First Chapter of the Gospel According to St John* (London, 1660), 219–20.

⁸ Flavel writes, "The design and end of the application of Christ to sinners is the communication of his benefits to them; but seeing all communications of benefits necessarily imply communion, all communion as necessarily presupposes union with his person." John Flavel, *The Method of Grace in Gospel Redemption*, in *Works*, 2:33.

⁹ Flavel regards Christ as the exact or express image of the Father. He refers to persons as having been made in or after the image of God. Generally, Flavel speaks of the image of God in terms of holiness, placing the image of God in categories of righteousness rather than rationality or relationality. Crisp offers some discussion of the rationality and relationality theses, defending the notion that human persons are made in the image of God to the extent to which they conform to the image or likeness of Christ. Oliver D. Crisp, *Word Enfleshed: Exploring the Person and Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 52.

¹⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:33.

unity between the Father and the Son, Christ expresses the compassionate nature of God as the exact image of the person of the Father.

Affectionately

There are two mutual delights between the Father and the Son, namely, their delight in one another and their delight in the salvation of men.¹¹ Flavel describes the relationship between them as near and dear: “He was his Son . . . the Son of his love, the darling of his Soul: His other Self, yea, one with himself; the express image of his person; the brightness of his Father’s Glory.”¹² Flavel teaches that the nature of this affectionate union includes unmatched happiness, sweet communion, unmixed purity, and everlasting constancy.¹³ Describing the pre-incarnate state of Christ, Flavel affirms that the Father and the Son, “mutually let forth their fullest pleasure and delight, each into the heart of the other; they lay as it were embosomed one in another, entertaining themselves with delights and pleasures ineffable, and unconceivable.”¹⁴ The Father expresses the depth of his loving compassion by giving Christ, the darling of his soul. “In parting with him, he parted with his own heart, with his very bowels.”¹⁵ Speaking rhetorically, Flavel elsewhere celebrates the Father’s compassionate mercy: “If therefore he spare not the most excellent mercy, but parts with the very darling of his soul for us, how shall he deny, or withhold, any lesser inferior mercy.”¹⁶ From the mutual delight between the

¹¹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:42.

¹² Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, 1:66. Howes describes the nearness and dearness of the relationship using the Biblical language of Christ being in the bosom of the Father. “This phrase doth not only hold forth that tender affection which God the Father bears to Christ; for that which we love dearly we lay in our bosoms.” John Howes, *Christ, God-Man Set out in a Sermon Preached at Northampton* (London, 1657), 13.

¹³ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:46–47.

¹⁴ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:43.

¹⁵ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:66–67.

¹⁶ John Flavel, *Twelve Sacramental Meditations Upon Select Places of Scripture, to Prepare Believers for the Ordinance of the Lord’s Supper*, in *Works*, 6:425. Flavel elsewhere infers, “What an astonishing act of love was this then, for the Father to give the delight, the darling, of his soul, out of his

Father and the Son, Flavel infers the profundity of God’s compassion toward men.

Additionally, the Father and the Son mutually delight in the salvation of sinners. This being the case, man’s salvation became the business transacted between the Father and the Son in the covenant of redemption from all eternity.¹⁷ In agreement with many of his Puritan contemporaries, Flavel concurs that the Father promises to uphold and reward the work of his Son.¹⁸ The Son agrees to assume human flesh and accomplish the work of redemption.¹⁹ “The Father here agrees and promises to give him, if he will undertake the redemption of the elect, by pouring out his soul unto death.”²⁰ Essentially, redemption is the great errand for which Christ came down from heaven, the business of

very bosom, for poor sinners . . . Let all men, therefore, in the business of their redemption, give equal glory to the Father with the Son . . . if the Father had not loved thee, he had never parted with such a Son for thee.” Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:49.

¹⁷ The contemporary debate within covenant theology regarding the *pactum salutis* concerns the legitimacy of describing the eternal counsel of the Godhead from all eternity in the matter of redemption as a covenant. While Letham upholds that redemption “rests on an eternal determination by God in which all three persons are engaged,” he raises Trinitarian issues including the indivisibility of the (simple) Trinity (rather than the Godhead having two wills and two agents), the subordination of the persons of the Trinity, and the absence of the person of the Holy Spirit. Instead, Letham argues that the notion of the “eternal Trinitarian counsel” avoids these dangers while preserving the unity of the work of all the persons of the one God. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2019), 313–24. Likewise, Herman Hoeksema raises the issue of the absence of the Holy Spirit in the agreement between the Father and the Son. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publisher Association, 1973), 293. Additionally, Robertson argues against the notion of an eternal covenant by stating that it extends beyond the bounds of Scriptural evidence. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1987), 54. Notable proponents of the *pactum salutis* include Herman Bavinck. See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). Also J. V. Fesko in several works on the covenant of redemption. J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015). J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2016).

¹⁸ Parr elucidates the contours of the covenant of redemption as espoused by Strong and Flavel. In actuality, the heart of God in the covenant of redemption should not be solely conceived by the Father and the Son, but the Spirit also. He writes, “The covenant of redemption insists that election be intentionally understood in terms of trinitarianism: that the election of the saints was the result of the gracious hearts of the Persons of the Trinity as they communed together.” Thomas Parr, “English Puritans and the Covenant of Redemption: The Exegetical Arguments of John Flavel and William Strong,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 12, no. 1 (January 2020): 59.

¹⁹ There are various examples among the seventeenth-century reformers expounding the covenant of redemption. By way of example, see Patrick Gillespie, *The Ark of the Covenant Opened, or, A Treatise of the Covenant of Redemption between God and Christ* (London, 1677).

²⁰ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:53.

the commission he received.²¹ Consequently, this agreement reveals the foreseen compassion of the Godhead:

The external cause of that satisfaction, which the Father decreed, and the Son made, was the miserable state we were in, upon the account of our sins, which justly deserved eternal punishment, and bound us over unto it: we being in this forlorn condition, the God of mercy had compassion on us, and for our sakes, the Son of God underwent all that punishment which we deserved to suffer.²²

Supposing a conversation in eternity between the Father and the Son, Flavel notes the Father's justice lying before a company of miserable souls, awaiting divine judgment and eternal ruin. The Son declares, "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."²³ This is why Flavel calls the compassionate mercy of God the impulsive cause of remission, even to the vilest of sinners.²⁴ In sum, the Father and the Son maintain a mutual or shared compassion toward sinners in eternity, provoking them to covenant together for the redemption of the elect.

Essentially

Given the essential union between the persons of the Trinity, Flavel asserts that the Father and the Son have the same essence, nature, properties, and attributes.²⁵ He

²¹ John Flavel, *England's Duty Under the Present Gospel Liberty*, in *Works*, 4:150. There are abundant examples of the compassionate nature of Christ's commission. "The merciful God hath, in his abundant compassion to the perishing world, sent a physician from heaven, and given him his orders under the great seal of heaven, for his office." Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:190. Elsewhere, Flavel writes that Christ gave himself "freely, by his own voluntary interposition and susception of the mediatorial office, moved thereunto by his own bowels of compassion, which yearned over his elect in their misery." Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:469.

²² Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:55.

²³ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:61.

²⁴ Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:532. John Murray articulates a helpful distinction between the source of the atonement and the reason or necessity of the atonement. While the love of God for humanity functions as the reason and source for Christ's work, the necessity of redemption lies in the fact that mankind absolutely needed Christ incarnate and crucified in order to have forgiveness and reconciliation with God. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 4–5.

²⁵ Berkhof lists numerous ways modern theology has come to classify God's attributes. These have been debated and adopted to various degrees by different theologians. For example, they have been

writes, “This was his own Son by nature . . . begotten in an ineffable manner, from all eternity, in his own divine essence; and so is his Son by nature, having the same essence and nature with the Father, being co-equal, co-essential, and co-eternal with the Father.”²⁶ In this way, Christ is the express image of the Father. “There is a twofold preciousness of Christ, one in respect of his essential excellency and glory; in this respect he is glorious, as the only begotten Son of God, the brightness of his Father’s glory, and the express image or character of his person.”²⁷ Flavel affirms Nicaean orthodoxy by affirming the eternal and ineffable generation of the Son. He is “light of light” as a beam from the sun. While the saints do partake of God’s glory through the mediatorial work of Christ, the essential glory shared between the Father and the Son is incommunicable.²⁸ For Flavel, the essential glory of Christ means that the Son and the Father have “the same name, the same nature, the same essential properties, the same will, and the same glory.”²⁹ Thus, the compassionate nature of the Father is the compassionate nature of the Son. There is no division between the Father and the Son, as though one brings justice while the other embodies compassion.

God’s compassionate nature. Flavel further expounds upon the essential properties shared by the Father and the Son in his exposition of the Westminster Shorter

classified between natural and moral attributes, absolute and relative attributes, and immanent and eminent attributes. He admits the most common approach is to distinguish them between incommunicable and communicable attributes, those that are not analogous and those that are analogous to God’s creatures. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Louisville: GLH, 2017), 34. While Flavel’s systematic contribution is limited to his *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, he will employ the categories of communicable and incommunicable when considering God’s qualities. For example, Flavel will note that the essential glory of Christ is incommunicable while the mediatorial glory of Christ is communicated to his people.

²⁶ Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:421.

²⁷ John Flavel, *Pneumatologia: A Treatise of the Soul of Man*, in *Works*, 3:173.

²⁸ Flavel labels this type of shared glory social. As the saints have fellowship with Christ in his sufferings, they will also have fellowship with him in his glory. Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:240.

²⁹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:237.

Catechism. Among the several essential properties of God's nature Flavel includes God's wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.³⁰ The goodness of God "is an essential property of his nature, whereby he is absolutely and perfectly good in himself, and the fountain of all communicated goodness to the creature."³¹ Jeremiah Burroughs argues that all possible good, and all that can be imagined as good, is infinitely in him.³² Flavel holds that the difference between God's goodness and mercy subsists in their objects. While the object of mercy is misery, God extends his goodness in seasons of misery and happiness. Goodness, then, broadly encompasses God's compassion extended to humanity in their sin and suffering.³³ Consequently, God's goodness functions as the fountain of all his attributes. Flavel writes that the first property of God's goodness is "that all his other attributes flow out of it as their fountain: the other acts of God are but the effluxes of his goodness."³⁴ Quoting Exodus 33:19, Flavel includes mercy and compassion in the overflow of God's goodness.³⁵ While a perfect property, God's supreme act of goodness is his redeeming work in the person and work of Christ.

³⁰ Puritan orthodoxy upheld the essential unity of the attributes and properties of the Father and the Son. Take, for example, Gillespie's comments in *The Ark of the Covenant*: "For the glory of God considered essentially, or in regard of his glorious nature and essence, or his natural essential attributes: I mean, his wisdom, goodness, justice, mercy, faithfulness, etc. And that, for glorifying these universally, even all and every one of his attributes, all which received a new and glorious lustre, through the Covenant of Redemption, and God's sending of Christ to do that work which should never have been known nor manifested on Earth, nor in Heaven, but in the face of Jesus Christ." Patrick Gillespie, *The Ark of the Covenant Opened* (London, 1677), 39–40.

³¹ John Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:155.

³² Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel-Revelation in Three Treatises* (London, 1660), 14.

³³ After describing the goodness of God, Sedgwick acknowledges that there are four things in the kindness of God: his sweet, loving nature, the easiness of the communication of himself, his favorable encouragements, and his respectful tenders. Of his tenders he writes that God by his nature exudes a "helpful forwardness of dealing with his people in all gentleness and clemency. And therefore he is said to pity and spare his people." Obadiah Sedgwick, *The Bowels of Tender Mercy Sealed in the Everlasting Covenant* (London, 1661), 51.

³⁴ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:155.

³⁵ "And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.'"

Frequently citing Romans 2:4, Flavel also argues that one of the chief aims of God's goodness is to lead men to repentance.³⁶ In this way, he encourages seamen to consider the compassions and deliverances of God in their lives, and to respond appropriately to him: "Do you thus requite the Lord, who pitied you in your distress, and, being full of compassion, saved you when you cried to him? Is this the fruit of your wonderful salvation?"³⁷ Christ's compassionate works not only serve as a reflection of his Father's goodness but serve to draw sinners to him.

Beyond describing God's essential goodness, Flavel depicts God's compassion in a variety of ways, often using comparative or superlative descriptions. For example, he draws upon Scriptural analogies of the heavens, light, and sea to describe the compassionate grace, or compassionate bowels, of God. In reference to God's superabundant grace, he writes, "Waters do not so abound in the ocean, nor light in the sun, as grace and compassion do in the bowels of God towards broken-hearted and hungry sinners."³⁸ He states elsewhere that "the infinite tenderness and compassionateness of our God, is a sweet encouragement to resign and commit ourselves and all we have into his hands; his mercy is incomparably tender towards his people, infinitely beyond whatever any creature felt stirring in its own bowels."³⁹ According to Flavel, the compassion of God is great and tender, far exceeding the creature-compassions seen in any living soul. Appealing regularly to Isaiah 49:15, Flavel says the intensity of God's compassion is beyond that of a nursing mother, such that he will not forget his people.⁴⁰ "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no

³⁶ "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"

³⁷ John Flavel, *The Seaman's Companion: Six Sermons on the Mysteries of Providence as Relating to Seamen; and the Sins, Dangers, Duties and Troubles of Seamen*, in *Works*, 5:366.

³⁸ Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:153.

³⁹ John Flavel, *The Righteous Man's Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:410.

⁴⁰ Flavel also utilizes the fatherly side of parental compassion to describe God's compassion.

compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” God is the fountain of compassion because it is his nature. “From the divine nature, compassion and mercy are inseparable.”⁴¹ Christ is of the same nature as the Father,⁴² hence “the glory of God’s attributes do shine more brightly in the face of Christ than any other ways.”⁴³

God’s compassionate preference. Flavel never emphasizes the compassionate nature of God to the detriment or exclusion of his other attributes, including his justice and holiness. Certainly, Flavel upholds the coming reality of eternal ruin and final judgment for those outside of Christ. Additionally, he makes it clear that God does not free his people from all afflictions: “Christ hath not freed believers, in this world, from the rods of affliction. God, in giving us our liberty, doth not abridge his own liberty.”⁴⁴ At times God does intentionally afflict those who belong to him. He even expresses anger towards them.⁴⁵

He appeals to Psalm 103:13 to highlight the compassionate nature of God: “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.”

⁴¹ Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:420.

⁴² Torrance has concisely summarized this essential unity of the compassionate nature between the Father and Son in modern theology: “The first thing to note here is that divine mercy and compassion are specifically attributed to Jesus in his relation to the multitudes: that is, his compassionate relation to the lost sheep of humanity is identically the same as God’s and is identical with God’s. When Jesus pours out his heart in compassion upon mankind, that is nothing else than God’s own act of love and mercy.” Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 132.

⁴³ Burroughs, *Gospel-Revelation in Three Treatises*, 114.

⁴⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:272.

⁴⁵ These manifestations and multiple dispositions inevitably raise questions with respect to the simplicity of God, his composition or division. Dolezal succinctly summarizes the doctrine of simplicity: “The principal claim of divine simplicity is that God is not composed of parts. Whatever is composed of parts depends upon its parts in order to be as it is.” James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 40. Because God is not composed of parts and is therefore not divisible, his attributes and essence being identical and one. “Every attribute of God is identical with his essence.” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, 173. Augustine intimates this same concept with respect to his wisdom, power and justice, defending the unity of the Trinity. St Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Haddan (Savage, MN: Lighthouse, 2018), 173. Charnock underscores the interdependence of God’s attributes of perfection by using simplicity to defend God’s nature as a spirit and his immutability. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 1

Flavel reconciles these realities with God’s compassionate nature by insisting that there is no alteration (or inherent change) in God’s goodness in the expression of his judgment. Rather, it is part of the nature of goodness to expel evil. In his exposition of the catechism, Flavel speaks to this point, asking if the judgments of God upon the wicked are impeachments of his good nature. He answers, “No; it is the property of goodness to hate and punish evil in the impenitent.”⁴⁶ God’s judgments and afflictions are mixed with his compassion. “It is true, indeed,” says Flavel, “the Lord tells Jerusalem, that she had received of his hand double for all her sins . . . But that is not the language of strict justice, but of compassions rolled together.”⁴⁷ On other occasions, Flavel describes God’s compassion as “rolled together” with his coming judgment of Jerusalem for her obstinacy. Clearly, there is a compassionate intent in God’s afflictive providences. Flavel asks, “Do you think that God’s afflictions, or pardons, are blindfold acts, done at random? How inconsistent is this with Divine dispensations.”⁴⁸ He argues that “the

(Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), 267. Flavel affirms the indivisibility of God in his arguments about the origin of the soul of man. Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:492. Elsewhere, Flavel affirms the identity of God’s attributes and his essence. Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:452. See also Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:150. The doctrine of simplicity shapes a theological understanding of God by positing that there exists a harmony among his attributes, as God’s essence remains undivided. As Jones states, “The simplicity of God helps us to understand that perfect consistency exists in God’s attributes.” Mark Jones, *God Is: A Devotional Guide to the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 32. In this way, God’s expressions of his goodness and wrath or love and anger are not manifestations of a capricious God who relates according to divided attributes. Instead, since all the attributes of God are identical with his essence, God always acts within his perfect nature given the harmony of his being. According to Beeke, much of the language used of God may be described in the contrasting categories of univocal, equivocal, and analogical language—distinctions that have been adopted by the Reformed tradition. Joel Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Revelation and God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 535. While the knowledge of the infinite creator is inexhaustible and immeasurable, human beings have the capacity to speak of God (and have knowledge of God) analogically because God has revealed himself to his creatures whom he made in his image. Consequently, an understanding of the manifestations of God’s compassion and wrath function analogically for an understanding of God’s relationship with his creation. For a historical/exegetical approach to the doctrine of divine simplicity: Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (London: T&T Clark, 2018). For discussions regarding the doctrine of simplicity and the Trinity: Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021). Peter Sanlon, *Simply God: Recovering the Classical Trinity* (IVP UK, 2014). Richard C. Barcellos, *Trinity and Creation: A Scriptural and Confessional Account* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2020).

⁴⁶ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:155.

⁴⁷ John Flavel, *A Sermon Preached for the Funeral of John Upton of Lupton*, in *Works*, 6:136.

⁴⁸ John Flavel, *Vindiciarum Vindex: Or a Refutation of Mr. Philip Cary’s Rejoinder to My*

meanest and most afflicted Christian is owner of many rich, invaluable mercies.”⁴⁹ God’s afflictive providences function as a school, training his people to reap the fruit of spiritual good. Christ, in his infinite wisdom, sanctifies these afflictions to his people, so that they might serve as instruments for the good of his church.

Not least among these considerations is Flavel’s distinction between God’s preferred work versus his strange work. God prefers compassion over judgment. “That is the darling attribute which God greatly delights to exercise. The tender mother draws not out her aching breast with such delight to her hungry crying child, as the Lord doth his mercy and compassion to broken-hearted and hungry sinners.”⁵⁰ In reference to God’s work of judgment, Flavel states, “Which shews us with what reluctance and great unwillingness the Lord goes about such a work as this. The work of judgment is his strange work, it pleases him better to execute the milder attribute of mercy towards his children.”⁵¹ Flavel explains that God is patient towards sinners. Though he must clear his offended justice, he manifests long-suffering in awaiting the return of his people and in removing any defenses the impenitent have against God. Appealing to Amos 4:6, Flavel affirms that God uses lesser threats and gentle corrections to prevent greater dangers for his people.⁵² When they are humbled through these providential afflictions, God’s “heart is melted into compassion to them.”

Revealed in Christ

Christ states, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Christ is

Defense of the Right of Believers' Infants to Baptism, in *Works*, 3:573.

⁴⁹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:412.

⁵⁰ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:154.

⁵¹ John Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings, or the Best Work in the Worst Times*, in *Works*, 6:7.

⁵² “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me.”

one with the Father, not only affectionately and essentially but by way of communicative mediation. “He is in Christ also as Mediator, by communicating the fullness of the Godhead, which dwells in him as God-man, in a transcendent and singular manner, so as it never dwelt, nor can dwell in any other.”⁵³ Elsewhere, Flavel argues that the best way to behold God is to look at Christ.⁵⁴ Christ is one with the Father essentially, and the Father communicates the fulness of the glory of the Godhead—including his goodness and compassion—to him.⁵⁵ Because he has revealed the Father in his person, Christ is the highest means of attaining the knowledge of God’s compassion. Flavel admits as much when outlining ways in which we know God. While we may know *in vestigio*, *in umbra*, and *in speculo*, we also know, says Flavel, *in filio*, in the face of Christ: “This is the highest way of attaining the knowledge of God in this life.”⁵⁶ While the knowledge of God’s compassion may be ascertained in the creation through rational apprehension, the knowledge of the compassion of the Father has been superlatively revealed through his Son. Even so, such knowledge should not be divorced from the written Word, which is the Word of Christ, the only rule of faith and practice.

⁵³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:33.

⁵⁴ John Flavel, *Navigation Spiritualized: A New Compass for Seamen*, in *Works*, 5:210. Speaking of the Trinity in his commentary on Paul’s epistle to the Colossians, Paul Baynes writes, “Get Christ, know him, and thou knowest all.” Underscored in Baynes’ comment resides the notion that Christ has revealed the Father in his person. Paul Baynes, *A Commentary Upon the First and Second Chapters of Saint Paul to the Colossians Wherein, the Text Is Clearly Opened, Observations Thence Perspicuously Deducted* (London, 1634), 77. Likewise, Cartwright expresses the same idea in his commentary on Colossians: “First he is called the image of invisible God, that cannot be seen by the eye of man. And not only is meant here but none can so much as come to the understanding of God, by the eye of the mind: But by our Savior Christ we see the God-head, those that were alive when he was on earth did see the God-head in him and we shall see God in him in heaven.” Thomas Cartwright, *A Commentary Upon the Epistle of Saint Paul Written to the Colossians*. (London, 1612), 57.

⁵⁵ Reformed theologians have consistently recognized Christ’s person as a revelation of God’s attributes, of truth and righteousness as well as grace and mercy. Bavinck writes, “All this changes, like any other fact of revelation, when also the person of Christ is viewed theologically in accordance with the Scriptures as the one who is ordained by God to display his attributes in this world of sin, particularly the attributes of righteousness and grace and, against all opposition, to maintain his honor as God.” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 274.

⁵⁶ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:46.

Knowing God's Compassion in Creation

While Flavel nowhere articulates a thorough or methodical epistemology, it is evident that he believes some knowledge of God may be obtained in the created order through humanity's rational capacity. Referencing the first school wherein the soul apprehends truth about God, Flavel argues that we hold him *in vestigio*, or "by his footsteps in the works of creation. God hath imprest the marks of his wisdom and power upon the creatures, by which impressions we discern that God hath been there. Thus the very Heathens arrive to some knowledge of God."⁵⁷ In *Navigation Spiritualized*, he encourages his readers to consider the extraordinary help they receive in the book of creation (the conscience in particular), which teaches them about God and their rebellion against him.⁵⁸ Certainly, Flavel considers the order of creation—including man's created rational capacity—insufficient for direction in the mysteries of Christ and heavenly things. While natural light has its place, it "can make no discoveries of Christ, and of the way of salvation by him. The most eagle-eyed philosophers among them were in the dark here."⁵⁹ Even so, he insists that the merciful God has provided people with a rational soul to comprehend his power and wisdom in his creation. It is "God's mercy to you, that your hearts may be melted into thankfulness for so distinguishing a favour to you."⁶⁰ Elsewhere, Flavel considers this same point in the practice of husbandry and declares that man is created with nobler ends than that of irrational animals: "When under loads your beasts do groan, think then; How great a mercy 'tis that you are men."⁶¹

⁵⁷ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:46. While Flavel at times spoke favorably of the philosophers, he was critical especially of the Greek philosophers and their ability to come to some knowledge of God. Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:272.

⁵⁸ Flavel, *Navigation Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:215.

⁵⁹ Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:273.

⁶⁰ John Flavel, *Divine Conduct or, The Mystery of Providence*, in *Works*, 4:364.

⁶¹ John Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized or, The Heavenly Use of Earthly Things*, in *Works*, 5:163.

Furthermore, God has instilled a natural impulse in humanity for compassion.⁶² Convincing his readers of the surpassing tender compassion of God, Flavel suggests that whatever good may be found in the creature must be found chiefly in God. “We see God hath put such a *storge*, and inclination into the very creatures, that they will expose themselves to preserve their young; and it cannot be imagined that the Fountain of pity which dropt this tenderness into the bowels of the creatures, should not abound with it himself.”⁶³ Elsewhere, Flavel notes that God’s attributes may be discerned in different aspects of creation.⁶⁴ Burroughs concurs,

When we come to look upon the creatures, and we see an excellency in one creature, and another in another . . . and conceive a being that hath all these together in him, this being is an excellent being indeed; this would make us to look upon God above the creature when we look upon everything that is good in the creature to be in God himself.⁶⁵

Frequently appealing to Isaiah 40:15, Flavel points to a nursing mother’s relationship with her weak and dependent children as an expression of compassion.⁶⁶ He exclaims, “A woman [the more affectionate sex] forget her child, a piece of herself, her sucking child, which, together with milk from her breast, draws love from the heart!”⁶⁷ Flavel concludes

⁶² Grudem lists mercy as a moral, communicable attribute of God. While God has communicated something of these attributes to humanity, they are also commanded. Mercy, grace and patience, says Grudem, may be seen as aspects of God’s goodness. He argues that mercy may be described as God’s goodness towards those in misery and distress, similar to compassion. Referencing 2 Corinthians 1:3 he writes, “This verse uses *oiktirmos*, ‘compassion, mercy,’ rather than *eleos*, ‘mercy,’ but the terms are closely related in meaning and both refer to compassion or goodness toward those in distress.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 200.

⁶³ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:334. Here, Flavel use the transliteration of the Greek word “*storge*” to refer to the instinctual inclination of familial affection.

⁶⁴ Specifically Flavel states, “In the works of creation you see one attribute manifested in one thing, and another in another thing; but in the sanctuary you may see beauty, even in all the attributes of God displayed there.” Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:25.

⁶⁵ Burroughs, *Gospel-Revelation in Three Treatises*, 10–11.

⁶⁶ “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

⁶⁷ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:172.

that God will not forget his needy people. In sum, God has placed an inclination to compassion in humanity. This dispositional capacity serves as a means to direct humanity to a knowledge of God's goodness, which surpasses that of his creatures.

The inclination to compassion implanted within humanity is not only inferior to the compassion of God, but it is damaged and corrupted by the fall. Upholding the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve, Flavel acknowledges the introduction of original sin at the dawn of creation: "Our first parents being left to the freedom of their own will, fell from the estate wherein they were created, by sinning against God."⁶⁸ The evil of the transgression of God's law principally consists in the offense and rebellion committed against God, and in the disfigurement of the soul. Flavel writes that the evil in sin "highly wrongs the sinner's soul by defacing, defiling, and damning it."⁶⁹ Correspondingly, humanity's inclination toward compassion, given by God, has also been marred. Returning to the analogy of the nursing mother, Flavel speculates whether there are mothers who would ignore their child's needs: "Can such a thing as this be in nature! Possibly it may; some such cruel mothers may be found . . . Though human corrupt nature may be so vitiated, yet from the divine nature, compassion and mercy are inseparable."⁷⁰ Again, "Can such a thing as this be in nature? Possibly it may, for creature-love is fickle, and variable."⁷¹ Though compassion has been implanted by God into humanity at creation—functioning as a communicable attribute—original sin has defaced and vitiated it.

⁶⁸ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:167.

⁶⁹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:169.

⁷⁰ Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:420.

⁷¹ John Flavel, *A Token for Mourners*, in *Works*, 5:637.

Knowing God's Compassion in Christ

Flavel's knowledge of the compassion of God does not principally rest in the created order. Instead, he acknowledges that Christ has revealed the mind of God. In accordance with the Westminster standards, Flavel asserts that Christ in his prophetic office came to reveal the will of God for the salvation of men: "Jesus Christ was a tender-hearted Minister, full of compassion to souls . . . He was full of bowels to poor sinners."⁷² Again, "This Prophet, Jesus Christ, taught the people the mind of God in a sweet, affectionate, and taking manner . . . How sweetly did his words slide to the melting hearts about him! He drew with cords of love." Christ revealed the compassion of God in his life and doctrine. Flavel acknowledges that Christ's entire life manifested his desire to be with his people. Though he could have brought immediate judgment and ruin upon those who opposed him, Christ performed wonders of healing to save and preserve men's bodies.⁷³ Flavel describes Christ's doctrine (or teaching) as a wooing—"a most pathetic invitation unto sinners . . . whenever he opened his lips, heaven opened, the very heart of God was opened in it to sinners."⁷⁴ In both the manner of his life and content of his teaching, Christ reveals the compassion of God.

It would be incorrect to impose a sharp separation between the living Word and the written Word in Flavel's teaching. The neo-orthodox theology of the twentieth century, featured in theologians such as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, tended to minimize or erode the objective inspiration, truthfulness, and authority of the written text, embracing the notion that knowledge of God comes through an "encounter" with him in the text.⁷⁵ Richard Muller contrasts the Reformed view as follows:

⁷² Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:129.

⁷³ Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:116.

⁷⁴ Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:116–17.

⁷⁵ Morrison argues that while Barth did in fact distinguish between the incarnate Word and the textual Word, he did not fully divide them, separating Scripture from God's Word. John D. Morrison, "Barth, Barthians, and Evangelicals: Reassessing the Question of the Relation of Holy Scripture and the

It was never argued by any of the older Reformed theologians that direct encounter with Christ somehow mediated knowledge of God: their assumption was that the knowledge of God as Redeemer, grounded in and focused on Christ, was to be found in Scripture. . . . Reformed theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries assumed that the pre-incarnate Word, the *logos asarkos*, together with the Holy Spirit, was responsible for the revelation of the divine plan of redemption throughout Scripture.⁷⁶

The Westminster standards uphold a high view of the Bible. Its authority does not rest on man, nor does its efficacy derive from any human power. Instead, it is divinely inspired and, therefore, it functions as the sole rule of faith and practice.

Flavel unequivocally endorsed this view of Scripture: “Of the written word we must say, No words like these were ever written since the beginning of time, which can (as one speaks) take life and root in the soul . . . This is the most transcendent and glorious medium of manifestation.”⁷⁷ Flavel’s understanding of the efficacy of the Word in the soul of man confirms his high estimation of Scripture. God will either use the express words of Scripture, or he will use language that is agreeable to Scripture, to speak to the heart of man for conviction, instruction, or comfort.⁷⁸ Scripture is Christ’s word. Regarding audible voices from God, Flavel writes, “As to oraculous voices, we may sooner meet satanical delusions, than divine illuminations in that way. . . . I am sure Christ’s voice in the written word is more sure than a voice from heaven.”⁷⁹

Flavel believes that the written word proclaims the compassion of God in Christ: “In the written word are found all sorts of refreshing, strengthening and heart-

Word of God,” *Trinity Journal* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 187–213. For interaction between modern theologians and Barth on the topic of Scripture as the Word of God, see John D. Morrison, “Scripture as Word of God: Evangelical Assumption or Evangelical Question?,” *Trinity Journal* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 212–13. For greater understanding of Emil Brunner and his theology regarding the revelation of the written Word, see Richard Muller, “Christ-The Revelation or the Revealer? Brunner and Reformed Orthodoxy on the Doctrine of the Word of God,” *JETS* 26, no. 3 (September 1983): 307–19.

⁷⁶ Richard A. Muller, “A Note on ‘Christocentrism’ and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 257–58.

⁷⁷ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:339.

⁷⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:325.

⁷⁹ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:172.

reviving promises prepared by the wisdom and care of God for our relief in the days of darkness and trouble; promises of support under the heaviest burdens and pressures.”⁸⁰ Unquestionably, Flavel believes that the heart of God’s compassion, as revealed in Scripture, is seen in his giving of Christ for poor sinners. He also maintains that the revealing of Christ’s word is itself an act of compassion. “The enjoyments of the scriptures, and an able, faithful ministry to expound and apply them, is a special mercy to any people.”⁸¹ Hence, God’s compassion is visible in Christ by means of his Word, not only because his compassionate promises are found in it, but because he has made himself known in the giving of it.

Embodied in Christ

The doctrine of God’s revelation cannot be severed from the incarnation, for the Word was made flesh. Douglas Kelly notes, “The only way we can know who God really is, is for Christ to have taken on our human nature in order to show us the heart of the Father.”⁸² According to Flavel, the incarnation is one of the deepest mysteries of godliness. It is “a mystery, by which apprehension is dazzled, invention astonished, and all expression swallowed up.”⁸³ It is the greatest honor ever done to human nature that the person of the Son should leave the bosom of the Father and assume flesh for the redemption of sinners. The assumption is a profound abasement, for Christ made an

⁸⁰ John Flavel, *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, in *Works*, 3:278.

⁸¹ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:271. “He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the Lord!” (Psalm 147:19–20). Athanasius makes similar remarks regarding man’s need for revelation for the knowing of God. “He perceived that they, owing to the limitation of their nature, could not of themselves have any knowledge of their Artificer, the Incorporeal and Uncreate. He took pity on them, therefore, and did not leave them destitute of the knowledge of Himself.” Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 37–38.

⁸² Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology: The Beauty of Christ: A Trinitarian Vision* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2014), 189.

⁸³ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:74.

incalculable stoop in stripping himself of his robes of glory.⁸⁴ “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.”⁸⁵ Because he has assumed a human nature, Christ expresses the compassion of God in his assumption, he qualifies himself for compassion by his human experience, and he demonstrates compassion in his life and death.

The Compassion of the Assumption

Affirming Westminster Christology, Flavel defends Christ’s union in his one person of true and perfect human nature with his divine nature in the incarnation. The hypostatic union between the natures is not physical, as though death could dissolve it as it does the union between soul and body. Nor is the union mystical, as though the two natures could be considered two separate persons. Instead, Flavel argues that in the assumption the “second Person in the Godhead did take the human nature into a personal union with himself, by virtue whereof the manhood subsists in the second person, yet without confusion, both making but one person.”⁸⁶ While the two natures are inseparable,

⁸⁴ In accord with Chalcedonian Christology, Flavel did not hold that Christ surrendered his divinity in the incarnation. Instead, he was humbled by assuming a fully human nature, sin excluded. Flavel develops his Christology most clearly in sermon five of *The Fountain of Life*, entitled “Of Christ’s Wonderful Person.” He speaks of the doctrine of the assumption both negatively and positively. Negatively, Flavel argues that the incarnation should not be considered a consubstantial union (as between the three persons of the Trinity who all have the same nature), nor a physical union (for soul and body are dissolvable at death, unlike the hypostatic union), nor a mystical union (as is between Christ and believers). Positively, Flavel upholds that the hypostatic union is miraculous (or supernatural), integral (assuming the whole human nature), sinless, distinct (each nature retaining its own essential properties), and inseparable. Flavel writes, “So that though we truly ascribe a two-fold nature to Christ, yet not a double person; for the human nature of Christ never subsisted separately and distinctly, by any personal subsistence of its own, as it doth in all other men, but from the first moment of conception, subsisted in union with the second person.” Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:76. While he believes that the properties of the natures agree with the person, Flavel acknowledges that the two natures of Christ do not transfuse or impart their properties to the other nature. Hence, while it would be agreeable to speak of the crucifixion of the Lord of glory, it would be improper to speak of the divine nature as having suffered, bled, and died.

⁸⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:238.

⁸⁶ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:76.

each retains its own essential properties; thus, the two natures are distinct. That being said, Christ assumed a human nature integrally, that is, “with all and every faculty and member pertaining to it.”⁸⁷ Citing Augustine, Flavel acknowledges that Christ assumed the whole nature that he might sanctify or heal the whole nature, every member and every faculty.⁸⁸ Because of this, it was necessary for Christ to assume a sinless human nature. Such a state excluded original sin, yet it included natural infirmities such as hunger, thirst, and weariness, those common to humanity and not formally or intrinsically sinful. Several points regarding Christ’s assumption of a human nature follow.

First, one of the ends of Christ’s assumption of a human nature is that he might demonstrate compassion. Considering the grounds of the incarnation, Flavel argues that Christ did not assume a human nature of necessity, but voluntarily. Likewise, he did not assume a human nature to perfect the Godhead, but to perfect humanity.⁸⁹ Flavel considers several weighty ends of Christ’s humiliation, including the deliverance of his people from danger. God’s people, having lost their inheritance and being held in bondage, are delivered by Christ “freely, by his own voluntary interposition and susception of the mediatorial office, moved thereunto by his own bowels of compassion, which yearned over his elect in their misery.”⁹⁰ It was compassion that moved Christ, whom Flavel calls a “near kinsman,” to redeem his people and provide them with infinite

⁸⁷ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:76.

⁸⁸ Flavel references Augustine’s *City of God*: “For, His reason in assuming the whole of human nature without sin was to heal the whole man from the plague of sin.” Augustine, *The City of God, Books VIII–XVI*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan, vol. 14, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 166. Arrowsmith cites Gregory of Nazianzus: “And, indeed, unless, he had assumed the whole man, the whole man could not have been saved, saith Damazen. That which was not taken, could not be healed. If Christ had not taken the whole man, he could not have saved the soul.” Arrowsmith, *Theanthrōpos, or, God-Man*, 207.

⁸⁹ In a similar way, Berkouwer acknowledges that the hypostatic union is not a theoretical interest for God. Rather, the union of the two natures reveals the unity between his holiness and his mercy and compassion. G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 263.

⁹⁰ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:470.

blessings. The saints thus become Christ's own inheritance whereby he takes his people as a treasure unto himself. Appealing to Hebrews 2:17–18, Flavel writes, “And indeed this was one end of his assuming it, that he might be able to have compassion on us.”⁹¹ As Burroughs remarks, “God would never have worked such a strange a work, as to unite our natures into one person with his Son, if he had not meant to do some infinite good to mankind.”⁹² In sum, Christ demonstrates an eagerness to extend mercy and compassion to his people. His compassion motivates him to take on human nature, becoming obedient to all the humiliations associated with living among sinful humanity.

Not only did the compassion of Christ move him to assume human nature, but it caused him to humble himself while on earth. Because he lived in a sick, sorrowful, and sinful world, his compassion moved him into places of greater lowliness. Flavel writes, “Our blessed Lord Jesus was yet more humbled in his life than all this, and that by his own sympathy with others, under all the burdens that made him groan. For he, much more than Paul, could say, *who is afflicted, and I burn not?*”⁹³ As he suffered sympathetically with the sick and wounded, he groaned as their suffering pierced his own soul. He wept with Mary over the death of Lazarus (John 11:35). He grieved at the lack of faith and the effects of demonic possession (Matthew 8:16–17). Foreseeing the miseries that were coming upon unbelieving Jerusalem, he mourned for their hardness of heart. Flavel reasons that Christ lived his life in a hospital, among the sick and wounded. He bore the burdens of those struggling in a sinful and suffering world. His deep abasement, an abasement incomparable to that any other creature, reasonably constitutes

⁹¹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:83. “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb. 2:17–18).

⁹² Jeremiah Burroughs, *Christ Inviting Sinners to Come to Him for Rest by* (London, 1659), 191.

⁹³ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:240.

a burden-bearing sympathy incomparable to that any other creature. For the holier a man is, the more he is grieved at sin. The more tender a man is, the more he is pierced by the miseries of others. For Flavel, there is none more tender and holy than Christ.⁹⁴

Third, Christ has integrally assumed a fully human nature and, therefore, he expresses the compassion of God in all the capacities of humanity—cognition, emotion, and volition. Flavel underscores this idea in the *Method of Grace*: “Whatever my distresses are for quality, number, or degree, they are all known even to the least circumstance, by Christ my Head: He looks down from heaven upon all my afflictions, and understands them more fully than I that feel them.”⁹⁵ Flavel goes on to reason that Christ “not only knows them, but feels them as well as knows them.”⁹⁶ Quoting Hebrews 4:15, he acknowledges that Christ, even now in heaven, is a priest who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.⁹⁷ He sympathizes, as the Great High Priest. Beyond this, Christ is willing to help in all our troubles. He has more than enough in his rich supply, and he bestows all earthly good, even upon his enemies. He is bountiful to strangers and will certainly love and care for his own. If Christ is willing to extend compassion to those who oppose him, he will certainly be compassionate to his own people. Because Christ has assumed all the capacities of human nature, he maintains a comprehensive tenderness in his knowing, feeling, and willing.

Lastly, Christ remains true God and true man in one person forever; thus, his ability to be sensibly touched with our suffering endures, though he is now in heaven.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:240.

⁹⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:46.

⁹⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:46.

⁹⁷ “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

⁹⁸ Ussher summarizes this doctrine concisely: “In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, that is to say by such a personal and real union, as doth inseparably and everlastingly conjoin that infinite Godhead with his finite Manhood in the unity of the self-same individual person.” James Ussher,

“If Jesus Christ has assumed our nature, then he is sensibly touched with the infirmities that attend it, and so hath pity and compassion for us, under all our burdens. . . . Oh what a comfort is this to us, that he who is our High-Priest in heaven, hath our nature on him, to enable him to take compassion on us!”⁹⁹ Flavel calls Christ’s ascension and exaltation a wonderful advancement. Yet, despite this wonderful state, he does not forget his people in their groaning.¹⁰⁰ Arrowsmith asks, “Is it likely, that Christ that is man, should forget man, now he is at the right hand of the Father, clothed in that nature that we have.”¹⁰¹ In his *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, Flavel reasons that Christ ascended in our nature into heaven to be a mediator in our nature. Because he has the same nature, he “is full of tender compassion to people’s infirmities.”¹⁰² For Flavel, Christ’s human nature is essential to his ongoing compassion in heaven. Though he is exalted, he does not forget us.

Qualified by His Experience

Flavel consistently asserts that Christ was qualified for compassion by his own experience in the days of his flesh: “These sinless infirmities were necessary to be assumed with the nature . . . by them our High Priest was qualified from his own

Immanuel, or, The Mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God (London, 1645), 3.

⁹⁹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:83.

¹⁰⁰ Flavel does not specifically take up the question of Christ’s sufferings in heaven. In short, if Christ sympathizes with his people still, how is it that there is suffering in heaven? Goodwin does take up this question in *The Heart of Christ*. “These affections of pity and sympathy so stirred up by himself, though they move his bowels and affect his bodily heart as they did here, yet they do not afflict and perturb him in the least, nor become a burden and a load unto his Spirit, so as to make him sorrowful or heavy . . . So that as in their rise, so in their effect, they utterly differ from what they were here below. And the reason of this is, because his body, and the blood and spirits thereof, the instruments affecting him, are now altogether impassible, namely, in this sense, that they are not capable of the least alteration tending to any hurt whatever. And so, his body is not subject to any grief, nor his spirits to any waste, decay, or expense.” Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 143.

¹⁰¹ Arrowsmith, *Theanthrōpos, or, God-Man*, 215.

¹⁰² Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:180.

experience, and filled with tender compassion to us.”¹⁰³ Christ has been furnished with tender compassion by the experience of infirmities in his body.

He is full of bowels and tender compassions to afflicted souls; he is one that can compassion, because he hath had experience, Heb. 5:2. If I must come unto the surgeon’s hands with broken bones, give me such an one to chuse whose own bones have been broken, who hath felt the anguish in himself. Christ knows what it is by experience, having felt the anguish of inward troubles, the weight of God’s wrath, and the terrors of a forsaking God, more than any or all the sons of men: this makes him tender over distressed souls.¹⁰⁴

It is not that Christ gained a compassionate nature by his experience, but that he did not know the limitations associated with living in fallen world and having the natural infirmities associated with humanity.¹⁰⁵ Christ has wrestled with the limitations and sufferings of humanity and is, therefore, qualified to be compassionate.

According to Flavel, Christ experienced grief, want, reproach, and shame. Additionally, he knew the devil’s temptations and was sensible of pains and tortures both in body and soul. Flavel also asserts that Christ knew natural fear, or the “apprehension of approaching evil, or impending danger. . . . To this natural fear it pleased our Lord Jesus Christ to subject himself in the days of his flesh; he was afraid, yea, he was sore amazed.”¹⁰⁶ Flavel especially underscores that Christ knew the hiding of his Father’s face, gaining a full sense of his wrath as he drank the bitter cup of judgment.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Flavel makes a clear distinction between personal infirmities and natural

¹⁰³ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:228.

¹⁰⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:196.

¹⁰⁵ O’Brien discusses Christ’s qualification in vocational terms, wherein he is made complete or fully equipped for his office. Peter T. O’Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 69. Flavel has a similar conceptual picture, wherein he is fully equipped for his compassionate office.

¹⁰⁶ Flavel, *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, in *Works*, 3:245. Köstenberger writes that instead of remaining in a state of spirit, the Word entered into the world experientially, with solidarity and identification to humanity. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 194.

¹⁰⁷ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:45–46.

infirmities, excluding the necessity of personal infirmities (e.g., lameness and dumbness) in Christ's mediatorial work. Christ is qualified for compassion because he knows all the natural infirmities associated with being human.¹⁰⁸ As Arrowsmith writes, "It is a great invitation to mercy, to see one in the same condition that we ourselves have been in."¹⁰⁹ Christ learned compassion because he knows the full range of miseries in human experience.

Flavel consistently affirms the innocent nature of Christ, noting that the natural infirmities (which he assumed) were sinless.¹¹⁰ Christ was without actual sin, and he was without original sin. "But Christ was without either, he had not the spot of original sin, for he was not by man . . . nor yet of actual sins; for, as his nature, so his life was spotless and pure."¹¹¹ Flavel emphasizes the compassion of Christ while addressing a reasonable objection concerning Christ's temptation and sinlessness. Essentially, the concern is that Christ's temptation was vastly different from that of other men. While men are defiled internally and assaulted externally, Christ was only assailed externally.¹¹² Flavel quickly

¹⁰⁸ Isaac Ambrose offers a similar list from the Gospels, albeit more detailed. He was born of a woman as other men, he was tempted of Satan, and he traveled and was therefore thirsty, hungry and weary, consequently able to be refreshed. He slept. He was poor and needy, sorrowful and sad. He was whipped and crucified, and was abandoned by the Father being crucified between thieves. Isaac Ambrose, *Looking unto Jesus a View of the Everlasting Gospel* (London, 1658), 124–25.

¹⁰⁹ John Arrowsmith, *Theanthrōpos, or, God-Man Being an Exposition upon the First Eighteen Verses of the First Chapter of the Gospel According to St John: Wherein Is Most Accurately and Divinely Handled, the Divinity and Humanity of Jesus Christ, Proving Him to Be God and Man, Coequall and Coeternall with the Father* (London, 1660), 216.

¹¹⁰ While the point may seem basic enough, it is not unimportant. There exists a temptation among theologians to emphasize the humanity of Jesus to the extent of describing him as having assumed fallen flesh. For instance, Torrance writes, "There can be no doubt that the New Testament speaks of the flesh of Jesus as the concrete form of our human nature marked by Adam's fall, the human nature which seen from the cross is at enmity with God and needs to be reconciled to God. In becoming flesh the Word penetrated into hostile territory, into our human alienation and estrangement from God. When the Word became flesh, he became all that we are in our opposition to God in our bondage under law—that is the amazing act of gracious condescension in the incarnation, that God the Son should assume our flesh, should enter a human existence under divine judgment." Torrance, *Incarnation*, 61.

¹¹¹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:98.

¹¹² For a historical overview of the various approaches to the impeccability of Christ, see John E. McKinley, *Tempted for Us: Theological Models and the Practical Relevance of Christ's Impeccability and Temptation* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

affirms this difference, noting that Christ would not have been a suitable or fit compassionate Mediator if he had not been sinless. His sufferings would have been of no benefit to sinners. Yet, Flavel argues that Christ still received an experiential sense of the misery of our condition. This, he says, is “a spring of pity and tender compassion to you.”¹¹³ Hence, both the experience of temptation as well as his internal purity qualify him for compassion. He has compassion because he understands our temptation. He extends mercy because he is undefiled in his sacrifice for us. Christ offers humanity the compassions associated with his knowledge of misery and weakness, and he offers the compassion of a perfect sacrifice.¹¹⁴

Demonstrated in His Suffering

Flavel calls attention to the fact that Scripture never describes Christ as having laughed or smiled, though on occasion it is said that he rejoiced in spirit. As a man of sorrows, Christ grieved in body and soul. Considering Christ’s bodily suffering, Flavel suggests that his sorrow impacted him: “Philosophers and physicians generally reckon sorrow among the chief cause of shortening life. Christ was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, and this some think was the reason that he appeared as a man of fifty, when he was little more than thirty years old.”¹¹⁵ Flavel suggests that Christ’s compassion moved him, despite his own suffering. Seeing the woman of Samaria, he forgets his own weariness, and opens his heart to her and calls her to repentance. His

¹¹³ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:244. Flavel’s contemporaries concur. Sibbes writes regarding Christ’s temptations, “But thus he yielded himself to be tempted, that he might both pity us in our conflicts, and train us up to manage our spiritual weapons as he did.” Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 46. Cowper also acknowledges the compassions in Christ’s temptation: “And fourthly, he humbled himself to suffer temptation, that by experience he might learn wherein the strength of Satan liyeth; so might be the more able to succour us in all temptations.” William Cowper, *Three Heavenly Treatises, Concerning Christ* (London, 1612), 138.

¹¹⁴ Peterson states it similarly, “Christ is able to give us grace because he is divine. He offers us mercy because his sinless humanity enables him to sympathize with his people.” Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 48.

¹¹⁵ Flavel, *A Token for Mourners*, in *Works*, 5:619.

physical refreshment takes second place to this sinner's need.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, he is moved to express compassion for those around him. Hearing the lament of the mother whose son has died (Luke 7:13), Christ was moved with tender compassion. When he saw Mary weep, he wept. As Warfield notes, "Our Lord's emotions fulfilled themselves, as ours do, in physical reactions."¹¹⁷ In Flavel's understanding, Christ's compassions were not merely internal dispositions, but were manifested outwardly in his physical body.

Yet, Christ's bodily suffering was not his greatest suffering. Without minimizing the seriousness of Christ's physical suffering, Flavel argues that his suffering of soul was far greater. "He suffered in all his members, head, hands, side, feet, from all hands, friends and enemies, in all his offices; yea, in his soul, as well as in his body; And indeed the sufferings of his soul were the very soul of his sufferings."¹¹⁸ In all the suffering of his human nature (but especially his soul suffering), Christ demonstrates his heart toward his people: "His sanctifying himself for our sakes, speaks the strength of his love, and largeness of his heart to poor sinners . . . so that what he did and suffered, must all of it have a respect and relation to us."¹¹⁹ Christ willingly embraced these sufferings, Beeke explains, "Every spark of sorrow that touched him was something he willingly embraced by becoming one of us."¹²⁰ Certainly, Christ suffered inwardly throughout his whole life, serving as a sign of his compassion and functioning as a persuasive argument to bring sinners to repentance.

¹¹⁶ Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:118.

¹¹⁷ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "The Emotional Life of Our Lord," in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2015), 138.

¹¹⁸ Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings*, in *Works*, 6:44.

¹¹⁹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:98.

¹²⁰ Joel Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Man and Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 813.

It is the cross that serves as the pinnacle of Christ's compassion. It was necessary that he should be God-man, so that he should have a body to offer. This bodily sacrifice was necessary so that he could serve as a compassionate priest for his people.¹²¹ Paul writes, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:32). Flavel draws three conclusions from this. First, Christ's sacrifice operates as the meritorious cause of God's forgiveness of our sins. Christ dies "in our room, place, and stead."¹²² Second, if the Father did not spare Christ on the cross (the greatest mercy), he will not withhold lesser mercies.¹²³ If he spares not Christ, "it can never be imagined that ever he should, after this, deny or withhold from his people, for whose sakes all this was suffered, any mercies, any comforts, any privilege, spiritual or temporal, which is good for them, and needful to them."¹²⁴ Third, the Father withheld compassion from the Son, to show his compassion to sinners. Flavel writes, "Not one drop of comfort came from heaven or earth; all the ingredients in his cup were bitter ones: There was wrath without mercy."¹²⁵ If forbearance was expected from anyone, it would have been from the Father. Yet, at the cross, the Father abated not one degree of his wrath as he withheld all compassion from his Son.

¹²¹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:146.

¹²² Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:419.

¹²³ A distinction should be made between Christ's compassion and sympathy at the cross. According to Macleod, it should not be said of the cross that God suffered with us, but for us. "The agony in the garden is indeed one of the great foundations of his compassion because there he plumbed the depths of our emotional weakness, but nowhere is it more important than here to distinguish between the Lord suffering with us and the Lord suffering for us. What he faced in Gethsemane we shall never face; and we shall never face it precisely because he faced it." Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 175.

¹²⁴ Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:418.

¹²⁵ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:423.

For the Glory of Christ

Despite these descriptions of Christ's compassionate nature, Flavel rejects any notion of a universalizing compassion—a mercy that eliminates God's justice.¹²⁶ In addition to teaching God's judgment upon those outside of Christ, Flavel devotes a significant amount of his pastoral care to explaining God's afflictive providences and the sorrows of God's people. They are not spared from affliction. Flavel is clear in his exposition of the Shorter Catechism that God's gracious nature does not impede nor exclude his judgments upon the wicked, and that even “the affliction of the saints flow from his goodness, and end in their true and eternal good.”¹²⁷ Referencing the example of Jonah, Flavel affirms that the compassion of God resides alongside his judgment. The prophet knew that God judges sinners, but he also knew that the Ninevites' repentance would stir God's compassion.¹²⁸ God never relinquishes his justice or his mercy.¹²⁹

Preaching from 1 Corinthians 2:8, Flavel acknowledges that Christ crucified is the Lord of glory.¹³⁰ There are two aspects of Christ's glory: essential and mediatorial. The first implies that Christ is God, having the same divine nature and, therefore, the

¹²⁶ The other pole is also a temptation—that is, to believe that God is not compassionate. Cole writes, “This is not an easy world in which to believe in a God of love.” He affirms God's compassionate heart writing “If we want to know what divine love is in our sort of world and the evidence for it, we tell the story of the incarnation and the atonement.” Graham Cole, *The God Who Became Human: A Biblical Theology of Incarnation*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 160.

¹²⁷ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:156.

¹²⁸ Flavel notes that free grace would make Jonah a liar. Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings*, in *Works*, 6:16. Flavel references Jonah 4:2, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”

¹²⁹ This notion can be found in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*. In considering God's compassion, he states that the consistency of God's compassion and his holiness can be found nowhere greater than in the fact that the Father gave his only begotten Son and made him an offering for sinners as a ransom. Nothing could be more inviting than his sacrificial love. No more could be given in order to satisfy his just nature. Anselm, *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 300.

¹³⁰ “None of the rulers of this age understood this, for it they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

same “unspeakable and inconceivable glory.”¹³¹ The second includes his person and work in redemption, wherein he not only extends the fullness of grace, but receives all dignity and authority over the church and world.¹³² By God’s wisdom, Christ’s essential glory is concealed in the incarnation, and he suffers reproach, dishonor, and shame, all the while seeking the glory of his Father. Concerning God’s glory, Flavel concurs with the Westminster standards that God’s primary end in his eternal decrees is to bring glory to his name. “God is unchangeable in his love to his people, pursuing, the great ends of all his gracious promises in a steady course of providence, wherein he will never effect, or permit anything that is really repugnant to his own glory.”¹³³ While he acknowledges that God does not approve of evil, God permits it in the world and turns it to his own glory. Flavel believes that God ordains all that comes to pass according to the counsel of his will and for the glory of his name. This chief end functions as the theological key to understanding God’s purposes in judgment and mercy.¹³⁴

While the vindication of God’s righteousness and the defeat of Satan bring glory to Christ, so too does the demonstration of goodness to his people. Flavel believes that afflictions serve as a vehicle for compassion, thereby bringing glory to God.¹³⁵ He writes, “We must conclude, in the general, he certainly designs his own glory, and his people’s advantage and profit in them. If he suffer them to be tried by reproaches . . .

¹³¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:237.

¹³² Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:237–38.

¹³³ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:380.

¹³⁴ The theology of the glory of God as the chief and last end comes to a climax in the reformed tradition in the work of Jonathan Edwards. In *The End for Which God Created the World*, the American pastor outlines both rational and Scriptural evidences that demonstrate God’s glory as the supreme and final end of all creation. Piper includes Edward’s thesis along with several chapters on the importance of Edwards and his theology in *God’s Passion for His Glory*. John Piper and Jonathan Edwards, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).

¹³⁵ Vanauken depicts this concept in his autobiographical account *A Severe Mercy*, wherein he grows in Christian maturity by placing his primary love in God. Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1987).

there is their profit.”¹³⁶ According to Flavel, the benefits of afflictions include unmasking hypocrisy, resolving doubts, destroying pride, preserving the soul, and presenting a living testimony against atheism. As Flavel states, “How many trials soever God brings his people under, to be sure neither his own glory nor their interest shall suffer any damage by them.”¹³⁷ Moreover, Christ demonstrates the glory of his power by bringing sweet comforts to his people amid their afflictions. By providing comfort and the means of deliverance, he manifests the glory of his power among his people.¹³⁸

At various points throughout his preaching, Flavel references God as the last end and chief good.¹³⁹ Speaking of God’s immutability, he argues that if anything could be added to or taken from him, then his nature would not be perfect and he would not be the chiefest good.¹⁴⁰ By the order of God’s creation, the affectionate capacity of man is designed to apprehend this chief good.¹⁴¹ “For the true happiness and rest of the soul not

¹³⁶ John Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity, or The Signs of Grace and Symptoms of Hypocrisy*, in *Works*, 5:579.

¹³⁷ Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity*, in *Works*, 5:580.

¹³⁸ Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings*, in *Works*, 6:9.

¹³⁹ Other reformers spoke in similar terms. Cartwright states that God is “infinitely good, in, and of himself; and consequently that he is the Chiefest Good.” Thomas Cartwright, *A Treatise of Christian Religion, or the Whole Body and Substance of Divinity* (London), 12.

¹⁴⁰ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:149.

¹⁴¹ Flavel assents to the Augustinian notion that God exists as the highest good. Man’s happiness rests in the apprehension of the highest good for its own sake. The heart will be restless until it rests in God. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Classics, 1961), 21. Augustine writes, “The highest good, than which there is none higher, is God, and for this reason he is the immutable good and therefore truly eternal and truly immortal.” Augustine, *The Manichean Debate*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New York: New City Press, 2006), 325. Elsewhere, Augustine argues that we ought to set our love and the striving of our whole life on the unchangeable good for its own sake, thus enjoying all other things rightly having the proper object of our love fixed on God. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 17. “God is the absolute value, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, and the happy life consists in knowing and loving God.” David Clyde Jones, “The Supreme Good,” *Presbyterion* 11, no. 2 (1985): 125. Exploring the historical roots of the Westminster Catechism’s first question (“What is man’s chief end?”), Warfield concludes that the proximate source is John Calvin. Yet, he adds, “It is not to be imagined, of course that these ideas were the invention of Calvin. They were the property of every Christian heart and especially of all who had learned in the school of Augustine. B. B. Warfield, “The First Question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism,” *The Princeton Theological Review* VI (1908): 573. The recurring theme in Augustine is the love, delight, and enjoyment of God, who is the supreme good and beauty. If man is to find final happiness and rest for the soul, he must find his enjoyment in that which is supremely glorious. There are a number of works exploring the notion of the *summum*

being in itself, nor in any other creature, but in God, the soul must necessarily move out of itself, and beyond all other created beings, to find and enjoy its true felicity in him.”¹⁴²

By the fall, however, man has abandoned God as the last end and chief good. “Man, by degeneration, is become a most disordered and rebellious creature, contesting with, and opposing his Maker, as the *first cause*, by self-dependence; as the *chiefest good*, by self-love; as the *highest Lord*, by self-will, and as the *last end*, by self-seeking.”¹⁴³ Though hardly neo-Platonic, Flavel at times speaks derivatively of the creation, noting that all good in the created order is first in God eminently. Though not extensively developed in his teaching, Flavel argues that man is designed to love and desire the final and supreme good, thereby finding satisfaction, rest, and happiness for his soul.¹⁴⁴

Consequently, the governance of God’s compassion rests not only on the glory of Christ and the procurement of his person as his elect’s greatest delight. Speaking of earthly comforts such as estates, wealth, and family relations, Flavel admits that there is no necessary connection between them and our eternal happiness: “It is not father, mother, wife, or child, in which our chief good and felicity lies; we have higher, better,

bonum. For example, Kirk surveys the doctrine throughout various points in Christian history, exploring Augustine’s iteration in the two cities and his neo-Platonic influences. Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum* (New York: Harper & Row, 1932). Lee’s dissertation explores Augustine’s Manichaean influences of the idea of good and its relationship to the *summum bonum*. Kam-lun Edwin Lee, “Augustine, Manichaeism and the Good” (PhD diss., Ottawa, Canada: St. Paul University, 1996). For a more comprehensive discussion of Augustine’s philosophy and teaching—wherein he integrates facets of living the good life: Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (Providence: Cluny Media, 2020).

¹⁴² Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:509.

¹⁴³ John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed, or The Great Work of a Christian Explained and Applied*, in *Works*, 5:425.

¹⁴⁴ The Augustinian influence is further noted in Flavel’s usage of beauty to describe Christ, having described him by the title of lovely as well as the beauty of heaven, the beauty of the rose of Sharon, and the beauty of the Lord. Bavinck suggests that it is inadvisable to speak of God’s beauty, as the Augustinian notion contains Neoplatonic overtones. Laying aside the issue of advisability, Bavinck further remarks that the Protestant theologians rightly preferred to speak of God’s majesty and glory instead. While it is true the Protestant theologians preferred to speak of God’s glory, it would be false to assume that they never used this nomenclature. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 254. For further consideration of the Platonic influences in Augustinian teaching, see John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007).

and more enduring things than these; all these may perish, and yet our soul be secure and safe . . . God hath better things to comfort his people with than these.”¹⁴⁵ Essentially, the loss of these things does not hinder the attainment of man’s chief end, but often moves his people toward it. God’s choicest mercies towards his people are kept safe, free from corruption and loss. Referencing Romans 12:2, Flavel argues that God’s will is good, acceptable, and perfect; “Good it must needs be, because the will and essence of God, the chief good, are not two things, but one and the same.”¹⁴⁶ In sum, all of God’s compassions, especially those benefits eternally secure in the work of Christ, aim at the happiness of man in God. “All I am, all I have shall be thine, thine to serve thee, and thine to be disposed of at thy pleasure. Thou shalt henceforth be my highest Lord, my chiefest good, my last end.”¹⁴⁷

Conclusion

Flavel places the person and work of Christ at the center of his pastoral ministry. In his teaching, he argues that Christ is the fullest manifestation of God’s compassion. As the second person of the Trinity, he is the exact image of God, sharing God’s goodness. Though God’s compassionate nature is evident in creation, it is the person of Christ (the living Word) who fully reveals it. Christ’s person is the enfleshment of divine compassion, demonstrating the tender-heartedness of God in the flesh. With all perfection residing in God, the glory of Christ’s person functions as the last end and chief good, governing all God’s just and compassionate decrees. Consequently, as the happiness and eternal satisfaction of man’s soul may only be found in the enjoyment and apprehension of God, Flavel acknowledges that Christ’s union is the greatest honor and

¹⁴⁵ Flavel, *A Token for Mourners*, in *Works*, 5:628.

¹⁴⁶ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:452. Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

¹⁴⁷ Flavel, *A Token for Mourners*, in *Works*, 5:635.

compassion that God can bestow.

CHAPTER 3

UNION WITH CHRIST: COMPASSION IN BELONGING TO GOD

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the doctrine of union with Christ to Flavel's theology and ministry. At various points in his writings, he implores other to "get union with Christ."¹ Mirroring John Calvin's oft-quoted remarks regarding the application of redemption, Flavel argues that the work of redemption is of no use to those who are without Christ.² "Christ's blood profits none but those that are in him. . . . For never was any wound healed by a prepared, but unapplied plaister. Never any body warmed by the most costly garment made, but not put on: Never any heart refreshed and comforted by the richest cordial compounded, but not received."³ Though featured

¹ John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life: A Display of Christ in his Essential and Mediatorial Glory*, in *Works*, 1:464. Yuille writes that "This motif permeates Flavel's works. Whether directly or indirectly, he is constantly handling this admirable and astonishing mystery." J. Stephen Yuille, *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel's Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), 4.

² There exists a great breadth of Calvin scholarship on union with Christ, addressing various questions including the centrality of union with Christ, the meaning of mysticism, and the nature of Christ's union with man. For example, recent scholarship has focused on the question of the centrality of union with Christ in the theology of Calvin. Gaffin, and the Westminster school, has tended to view union with Christ as the overarching concept in Calvin's soteriology. See Richard B. Gaffin, "Union with Christ: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections," in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. Andrew T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 271–88. Like Gaffin, Garcia emphasizes union with Christ in Calvin's thought by situating the two-fold grace (i.e. justification and sanctification) in the context of union with Christ. See Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008). Fesko examines the question within the contexts of both pre-Reformation and initial inheritors of Reformation theology. See J. V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012). Tamburello examines the notion of mysticism in Calvin's theology, noting that a denial of any "mystical" elements in Calvin rests on an inadequate understanding of mysticism. Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994). Brglez presents a critical study on another aspect of Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ, arguing that Calvin inconsistently presents Christ's union with both believers and, at times, humanity broadly. Henry Brglez, "Saving Union with Christ in the Theology of John Calvin: A Critical Study" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1993).

³ John Flavel, *The Method of Grace in Gospel Redemption*, in *Works*, 2:15. Flavel distinguishes between the meritorious cause and the applying cause of redemption. The meritorious cause is the purchase of salvation as "an act of Christ *without us*, whilst we are yet sinners; the application thereof is

throughout Flavel's works, union with Christ receives focused treatment in *The Method of Grace*. While frequently employing the Pauline language of being "in Christ," Flavel also speaks of the soul's espousal to Christ, the match between Christ and the soul, implantation (or engrafting) into Christ, and closing with Christ. The application of redemption by means of union with Christ is one of Flavel's central concerns in preaching and pastoral care.⁴

There is an explicit interconnection between Flavel's view of the hypostatic union in Christ and the believer's union with Christ.⁵ While he considers both to be marvelous works wrought by God, the hypostatic union serves as the basis of union of Christ: "No other creature but the soul of man on earth is capable of espousals to Christ; it is a dignity above that of angels, for Christ took not on him their nature, and the

by a work wrought *within us*, when we are believers. Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 3:313–14. Fesko argues that cause-and-effect language is not an exclusive mark of Lutheran theology, though often exclusively attributed. Instead, he argues that such language emerges in reformed theologians of the reformation as well as early seventeenth century. It was common, Fesko argues, "because it was the common way for theologians to explain the world around them" and therefore a common way to relate and understand Christian doctrines. J. V. Fesko, "Metaphysics and Justification in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Reformed Theology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 46, no. 1 (April 2011): 41.

⁴ This is not to say that union with Christ overshadows the accomplishment of redemption in the person and work of Christ. William Edwards rightly notes that the broader perspective of Flavel's soteriology places different emphasis on each aspect of Christ's saving work, redemption accomplished and applied. "The soteriological structure within which the mystical union functions is more complex. The whole cannot be reduced to the mystical union with Christ. As seen in Flavel, the hypostatic union has priority as redemption accomplished [and the mystical union] has priority over redemption applied." 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, no. 1 (2012): 58.

⁵ Beeke and Jones note that the seventeenth-century Reformed theologians "typically posited a threefold union with Christ in terms of God's immanent, transient, and applicatory works." Immanent union refers to union with Christ in eternity, transient union referring to union with Christ in time past in his mediatorial work, and applicatory union related to the saints' present union with Christ. Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 482. Fesko notes a different three-fold union in the work of Girolamo Zanchi supported by Vermigli and Calvin. According to Fesko, that union consists of a natural or incarnational union, a spiritual union, and a mystical union. As the spiritual union consists in glorification wherein the whole man is renewed into the likeness and glory of Christ, the third or mystical union "rests in between the natural and spiritual unions." J. V. Fesko, "Union with Christ," in *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 435. See also Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On The Work Of Christ And The Order Of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 220. Flavel, on the other hand, does not break apart union with Christ in these ways. Rather, he speaks of a three-fold union consisting of Trinitarian unity, the hypostatic union, and union with Christ. He posits a fourth moral or spiritual union among the saints by virtue of their union with Christ.

hypostatical union is the ground and foundation of the mystical union.”⁶ Elsewhere, Flavel notes that communion and participation in Christ’s benefits depend on the hypostatic union. In other words, Christ partakes of us (the incarnation) in order that we might partake of him (union).⁷ Both works give honor to humanity: the hypostatic union is the greatest honor bestowed upon human nature, while union with Christ serves as the greatest honor given to individuals.⁸ Correlatively, both are acts of condescension: in the first, Christ takes the form of sinful flesh; and, in the second, Christ abides in a sinful heart. With respect to compassion, while the hypostatic union operates as an honor to both good and bad, mystical implantation is a peculiar privilege and mercy, “a mercy kept from the world that is to perish, and only communicated to God’s elect.”⁹

While Flavel’s overarching metaphor depicts Christ as the fountain of life, he correspondingly expresses Christ as the fountain of pity and mercy, the channel of mercy wherein all the compassion of God flows from him to his people.¹⁰ “Christ is the channel of grace and mercy; through him are . . . all the streams of mercy that flow from God to us.”¹¹ Again, “There is not one drop of saving mercy that comes in any other channel than

⁶ John Flavel, *England’s Duty Under the Present Gospel Liberty*, in *Works*, 4:129. Flavel elsewhere notes that Christ’s assumption of a human nature communicates his desire to be in union with his people. Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:115. Hence, as Letham argues, “the incarnation should not be seen as merely a means to salvation. Rather, salvation finds its ultimate fulfillment in the union of humanity with God seen in the incarnate Christ.” Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2011), 41.

⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:144.

⁸ Hooker specifically calls union with Christ the soul’s exaltation. He states that they are now of the royal blood, having received the privilege of being within the very gate of heaven. Thomas Hooker, *The Soul’s Exaltation: A Treatise Containing the Soul’s Union with Christ* (London, 1638), 9–10.

⁹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:90.

¹⁰ Fountain imagery is in no way unique to Flavel. For example, the metaphor exists throughout the works of Richard Sibbes, where in *The Life of Faith* he states, “The Son is the fountain of life, because he is God, who is radically, fundamentally, and essentially life.” Richard Sibbes, *The Life of Faith*, in *The Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 361. Gatiss unpacks Calvin’s description of Christ as the inexhaustible fountain of all good things, noting especially its implications and use in union with Christ. Lee Gatiss, “The Inexhaustible Fountain of All Good Things: Union with Christ in Calvin on Ephesians,” *Themelios* 34, no. 2 (July 2009): 196–206.

¹¹ John Flavel, *Divine Conduct, or The Mystery of Providence*, in *Works*, 4:450.

Christ to the soul of any man.”¹² Yet again, “the tender mercies of God over poor sinners are in Christ. . . . he is the channel, through which all the streams of God’s mercy flow freely to the sons of men.”¹³ While the person of Christ operates as the highest manifestation of God’s compassion, union with Christ functions as the singular channel by which we receive God’s greatest compassion.¹⁴ The compassionate mercies of God flow to those who are in Christ from the person of Christ who is the mercy of mercies.¹⁵

Man’s sinful condition necessitates such a union.¹⁶ As Charles Sherlock suggests, there is a great deal “at stake for Christian faith in the way we understand sin and its beginning.”¹⁷ This chapter begins by considering Flavel’s understanding of sin. These considerations yield further insight regarding the dynamics of compassion in Flavel’s teaching on union with Christ. The chapter proceeds to demonstrate that Christ and his benefits are the greatest expressions of compassion given to sinners. Finally, it concludes with the pervasive theme of sympathy, a unique privilege for those in union

¹² Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:209.

¹³ John Flavel, *Twelve Sacramental Meditations Upon Select Places of Scripture, to Prepare Believers for the Ordinance of the Lord’s Supper*, in *Works*, 6:413.

¹⁴ This idea challenges the notion that Christian compassion should be seen only or primarily through the lens (on the basis) of the incarnation—Christ-as-example. One implication of union with Christ as a doctrine is that it constitutes a decisive challenge to regard Christ merely as our example.

¹⁵ The issue between Christ’s person and privileges is no small matter. As Metzger suggests, many Western Christians have begun to look to the East—either in Eastern Orthodoxy or Eastern religions—for a more satisfying spirituality. In his mind, the West has envisioned God’s salvific benefits like a blood transfusion, the church receiving the privileges of God yet independently of him. Paul Louis Metzger, “Mystical Union with Christ: An Alternative to Blood Transfusions and Legal Fictions,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 65, no. 2 (2003): 201–13.

¹⁶ Billings argues that for every notion of salvation there is a corresponding notion of sin: “for every notion of salvation has a corresponding notion of sin—the very thing salvation heals.” Essentially, if union with Christ operates as a notion of salvation, there must be a corresponding of hostility or division. J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for The Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 36.

¹⁷ Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 63. Gaffin concurs stating, “Salvation evidently has no meaning apart from sin. . . . We will be clear about salvation and its application only as we are clear about sin and its consequences.” Richard B. Gaffin, “The Work of Christ Applied,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Michael Allen (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 272.

with Christ.

An Estate of Sin and Misery

In accord with the Westminster Assembly, Flavel taught that God created humanity, male and female, after his image. This image consisted in righteousness and holiness. Accompanying these graces was knowledge of God. Additionally, God established a covenant of works with Adam, according to which he was forbidden to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The “Westminster divines viewed the covenantal perspective as a pervasive theological theme which was indispensable at every turn for its applicability to the life of the church.”¹⁸ This covenant was made with Adam, and “all his natural posterity, descending in the ordinary way of generation from him.”¹⁹ The covenant promised life and happiness upon condition of perfect obedience. In his exposition of the *Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, Flavel writes, “What communion had God with man before the fall? Man enjoyed the gracious presence and favour of God with him, which was better than life.”²⁰ This communion, however, was broken by Adam’s fall.

Scripture testifies that Adam and Eve fell in the garden by eating the forbidden fruit. Flavel adheres theologically with the notion that “the covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in his first transgression.”²¹ In

¹⁸ David B McWilliams, “The Covenant Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Recent Criticism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53, no. 1 (1991): 122.

¹⁹ John Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:166.

²⁰ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:173. Billings addresses the caricature of reformed theology that suggests that God is fundamentally opposed to humanity. Rather, he argues that the Reformed tradition follows an Augustinian line, believing that “true humanity is humanity in communion with God.” Billings, *Union with Christ*, 43.

²¹ This theological statement is drawn from the Westminster Catechism. Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:171.

harmony with his Puritan contemporaries, Flavel adheres to a federal (or representative) framework and, therefore, he employs the concept of being “in Adam” to describe humanity after the fall. Essentially, all were included in God’s covenant with Adam. “In Adam all are curs’d; no saving fruit, Shall ever spring from that sin-blasted root.”²² All are “in Adam” according to Flavel, irrespective of birth or pedigree. “The children of nobles are, by nature, the children of wrath, even as others . . . all blood is of one colour: it is all tainted in Adam, and mingled together in his posterity.”²³ Flavel sees a correspondence between the legal aspects of guilt and unrighteousness in Adam’s transgression and the resulting relational fracture with God and its accompanying miseries. As summarized in his exposition of the *Assembly’s Catechism*, the fall brought Adam and his posterity into an estate of sin and misery.

Flavel proposes that the evil of sin consists in the fact that it is an offence to God, in that it is a transgression of, as well as a lack of conformity to, his law. Flavel believes that everyone has a double spot on him—the “heart-spot” (original sin) and the “life-spot” (actual sin). Original sin consists in the privation of inherent goodness and includes an inordinate inclination that pervades human nature.²⁴ Actual sin, or specific transgression of God’s law, proceeds from original sin. In addition to the evil done against God, sin “highly wrongs the sinner’s soul by defacing, defiling, and damning it.”²⁵ For this reason, Flavel calls the fall a “deplorable misery.” It provokes God in all his holy will, and it mars his image of holiness and righteousness in man.

In addition to plunging man into an estate of guilt and sin, the fall resulted in

²² John Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized, or The Heavenly Use of Earthly Things*, in *Works*, 5:145.

²³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:4.

²⁴ John Flavel, *Pneumatologia: A Treatise on the Soul of Man*, in *Works*, 2:521.

²⁵ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:169.

broken communion and fellowship with God.²⁶ “All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse; and so made liable to all the miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.”²⁷ With respect to communion, Flavel teaches that the fall did not merely lead to guilt and corruption, but to a broken relationship with God. Thus, Flavel employs the nomenclature of rooted enmity, total aversion, and strong opposition of man’s heart against God.²⁸ In addition to God’s curse, man is liable to miseries in this life and the life to come. Future misery consists of the torment of hell, while present misery consists of “sickness, pain, poverty on the body; fear, trouble, sorrow on the mind, and at last death itself.”²⁹ Flavel enlists an array of adjectives to describe the plight of man: “woeful,” “miserable,” “wretched,” “naked,” “destitute,” “empty,” “deplorable,” and “diseased.”³⁰ Consistent with Scripture, Flavel frequently depicts humanity as dead.³¹

Given this estate of sin and misery, all “in Adam” deserve the greatest lamentations.³² Flavel is adamant that man has no claim to God’s mercy. “In Adam, we

²⁶ Plantinga argues that sin cannot be properly understood merely in legal terms. Rather, it must include the notion of relational fracture. “Criminal and oral misadventures qualify as sin because they offend and betray God. Sin is not only the breaking of law but also the breaking of covenant with one’s savior.” Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 12.

²⁷ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:173.

²⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:344. Owen also uses the language of enmity and aversion. He states succinctly “The word “enmity” toward God suggests more than the hostility that enemies have toward one another. Enmity is the personification of all hostility. Enemies may be reconciled, but enmity never is reconciled.” John Owen, *Sin & Temptation: The Challenge to Personal Godliness*, ed. James M. Houston (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1996), 15.

²⁹ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:174.

³⁰ Sherlock summarizes the situation of sin eloquently: “sin is a desperately tyrannous, disordering, death-dealing, chaotic riddle, the result of deliberate human choice, puzzling and terrifying as that choice may be.” Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, 63–64.

³¹ Flavel references Ephesians 2:1, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.” See Flavel’s exposition of Ephesians 2:1 in sermon five in *The Method of Grace*.

³² Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:430.

forfeited all right to all earthly as well as heavenly mercies.”³³ The forfeiture of God’s mercies necessitates an espousal (or union) with Christ, whereby we receive the greatest of God’s compassions.³⁴ As Lewis Smedes states, “Christ and Adam represent the beginnings of two conflicting histories of man.”³⁵ For Flavel, the human dilemma of being “in Adam” can only be rectified through the divine solution of being “in Christ.” He states, “In Adam all were shipwrecked and cast away; Christ is the plank of mercy, let down from heaven to save some.”³⁶

Union with Christ

Flavel affirms that all of Scripture plainly asserts the believer’s union with Christ.³⁷ While God established a covenant of works with Adam, he establishes a covenant of grace with Christ, engrafting believers into the stock of Christ.³⁸ He explains several false notions and misunderstandings of the Bible’s teaching on union with Christ. First, it is not a *mental* notion, but exists beyond imagination and fancy. Second, it is not a *physical* union. By means of the hypostatic union, the eternal Son of God assumed human nature; but the union between Christ and believers is spiritual. Third, it is not an *essential* union. God does not communicate the divine essence to those who are united to

³³ John Flavel, *A Caution to Seamen: A Dissuasive against Several Horrid and Detestable Sins*, in *Works*, 5:299.

³⁴ Jones excellently summarizes this concept noting that “if union with Christ is of the essence of salvation, the human tragedy of sin could be understood as union with Adam, whose breach of the Covenant of Works brought the divine curse on humanity.” Robert Tudur Jones, “Union with Christ: The Existential Nerve of Puritan Piety,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (November 1990): 194.

³⁵ Lewis B. Smedes, *All Things Made New: A Theology of Man’s Union with Christ*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 1998), 112.

³⁶ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:221.

³⁷ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:246.

³⁸ As Yuille explains, Flavel’s covenantal framework is constructed around three covenants. Besides the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, “The third is the covenant of redemption between God the Father and God the Son, who transacted in eternity to save the elect by the covenant of grace.” J. Stephen Yuille, *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel’s Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), 25.

Christ.³⁹ Fourth, it is not merely a *covenantal* (or federal) union. Though such a union exists, it “is consequential to and wholly dependent upon” the spiritual union between Christ and believers.”⁴⁰ Fifth, it is not merely a *moral* union, characterized by love and affection. Union with Christ does more than merely bind believers together warmly, it knits their souls to him mystically.

Positively, Flavel states that union with Christ “is an intimate conjunction of believers to Christ, by the imparting of his Spirit to them, whereby they are enabled to believe and live in him.”⁴¹ Flavel mentions several key characteristics of this union. First, it is *intimate*; it brings the believer very near to Christ. Second, it is *supernatural*; it is accomplished by the Holy Spirit’s power. Third, it is *immediate*; it excludes degrees of nearness. “Every member in the natural body stands not as near to the head as another, but so do all the mystical members of Christ’s body to him: every member, the smallest as well as the greatest; hath an immediate coalition with Christ.”⁴² Fourth, it is *fundamental*; it sustains all the fruits and privileges that are communicated to believers. Fifth, it is *effective*; it gives new life and vitality to the soul. Sixth it is *honorable*; it provides the ground for all hope and comfort in living and dying. Seventh, it is *fruitful*; it

³⁹ Flavel argues this point at various junctures throughout his works, noting that while believers do partake of Christ’s titles, privileges and glory, they do not partake of the divine substance itself. Various contemporary authors attempt to resurrect notions of deification and theosis. Zorgdrager, for instance, while contending that theosis has been properly misunderstood, argues that a retrieval of these terms fulfills a need in Protestant and reformed theology for a fuller understanding of salvation. Heleen Zorgdrager, “On the Fullness of Salvation: Tracking Theosis in Reformed Theology,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 8, no. 4 (2014): 357–81. Even so, these terms—theosis and deification—are not only a distortion of orthodox Christian faith, they are simply unnecessary given the clear and expansive concept of union with Christ. This concept certainly contains a full perspective of salvation and a clear ontological delineation between God and man. McCormack summarizes an important problem for divinization and theosis stating, “It is rarely if ever the case that the meaning of divinization is set forth in anything like a clear and consistent manner that would allow for meaningful discussion and debate.” Bruce L. McCormack, “Union with Christ in Calvin’s Theology: Grounds for a Divinization Theory?,” in *Tributes to John Calvin: A Celebration of His Quincentenary*, ed. David Hall (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010), 505.

⁴⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:38.

⁴¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:37.

⁴² Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:39.

produces a visible effect in believers. Eighth, it is *enriching*; it communicates all God's blessings, promises, providences, and glories (excluding essential glory) to believers.

Additionally, Flavel argues that there are two bands (or ligaments) that knit the believer and Christ together: the Spirit on his part and faith on the believer's part.

Importantly, the work of the Spirit precedes the act of faith. "We cannot take hold of Christ till first he take hold of us; no vital act of faith can be exercised till a vital principle be first inspired."⁴³ The Holy Spirit regenerates us, leading us to a pleasing life as well as an eternal life. The end of this quickening is to produce obedience in us and to prepare us for the enjoyment of God in heaven. Faith, on the other hand, is an act that grants the soul the right to both the person and privileges of Christ. Faith consists in the assent of the mind and the consent of the will to the Gospel, whereby the convinced sinner finds "nothing in Christ that is distasteful . . . and finds nothing wanting in Christ that is necessary, or desirable."⁴⁴ Flavel believes that faith is a great mercy. "Hence be informed how great a mercy the least measure of saving faith is: for the least measure of true faith unites the soul to Jesus Christ."⁴⁵ However many outward mercies God bestows, "The least measure or degree of saving faith, is a great mercy than God hath bestowed, or ever will bestow upon many that are far above you in outward respects."⁴⁶ In other words, espousal to Christ through Spirit-gifted faith is a far greater mercy than wealth, honor, health, or any other outward privilege.

Flavel supplies four biblical metaphors to illustrate the believer's union with Christ: graft and stock (Romans 6:5), wood and glue (1 Corinthians 6:17), husband and wife (Ephesians 5:23–26), and head and body (Ephesians 4:15–16). He argues that these

⁴³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:85.

⁴⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:108.

⁴⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:437.

⁴⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:127.

metaphors provide a complete picture of what it means to be one with Christ.⁴⁷ Yet, no single metaphor in and of itself provides a whole picture of union with Christ. While the marriage covenant is dissolvable, union with Christ is indissoluble. The metaphor of husband and wife communicates the intimacy of the relationship between Christ and believers.⁴⁸ While the head and body are united vitally, not all the members of the body lie equally close to the head. In Christ, all members (weak and strong) reside equally close to the head. Together, these metaphors communicate the near and vital relationship between Christ and his people. “So that, as we are said to die in Adam, as the branches die in the death of the root; so we are said to be raised from death in Christ, who is the head, root, and representation, of all his elect seed.”⁴⁹ Essentially, both Adam and Christ are roots (or common heads), communicating their conditions to those that belong to them.⁵⁰ Yet, Christ is significantly more fruitful and effectual as “he communicates

⁴⁷ Flavel does not explicitly argue that these are the only four metaphors for union with Christ. Beeke and Smalley propose several other additional metaphors, grounded in the creation-garden account, including Temple worship, eating and drinking and God’s presence, and being clothed by God’s grace. Joel R Beeke and Paul M Smalley, “Images of Union and Communion with Christ,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 8, no. 2 (July 2016): 125–36.

⁴⁸ Flavel often appeals to the *Song of Solomon* typologically, depicting the affection between Christ and the church. Flavel writes, “This book of the Canticles, is a spiritual epithalamium, sung in parts betwixt the heavenly bridegroom and the bride.” John Flavel, *A Coronation Sermon*, in *Works*, 6:547. Won asserts that various Puritans espoused a metaphorical approach to the *Song of Solomon*. He concludes that these pastors—specifically Thomas Goodwin and Richard Sibbes—were not acting unfaithfully in their reformed hermeneutic. Instead, “what they did was to adopt the general spirit of the tradition of the church, which goes beyond that of the hermeneutics of the Reformers, in the interpretation of the Song of Songs and to use it to fulfill their pastoral responsibility to their congregations in England, and especially to provide comfort for believers due in the context of national turmoils.” Jonathan Jong-Chun Won, “Communion with Christ: An Exposition and Comparison of the Doctrine of Union and Communion with Christ in Calvin and the English Puritans” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1989), 343–44. Sibbes’ work *Bowels Opened* stands as a more thorough and focused perspective on the Song of Solomon and the intimate union between Christ and the saints. He writes, “so none can enter into the mystery of this Song of songs, but such as have more near communion with Christ. Songs, and specially marriage songs, serve to express men’s own joys, and others’ praises. So this book contains the mutual joys and mutual praises betwixt Christ and the church.” Richard Sibbes, *Bowels Opened, Being Expository Sermons on Cant. 4:16, 5 & 6*, in *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth), 5.

⁴⁹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:491.

⁵⁰ Using the graft and stock metaphor, Brinsely compares Adam and Christ to two different stocks, having been removed from Adam and then grafted into Christ. John Brinsley, *Mystical Implantation, or The Great Gospel Mystery of the Christian’s Union, and Communion with, and Conformity to Jesus Christ Both in His Death and Resurrection Opened and Applied* (London, 1652), 23.

abundantly more to his, than they lost in Adam.”⁵¹

Distinctions

It is not that Flavel excludes the unregenerate from every one of God’s mercies. “I do not deny but there are thousands of other mercies bestowed upon the unregenerate; they have health, wealth, children, honours, pleasures, and all the delights of this life.”⁵² But they are excluded from God’s most precious mercies: Christ and his saving privileges. Because they are not grounded in God’s saving compassion (that is in Christ), there is not one drop of pardoning mercy.⁵³ Because the unregenerate do not have the peculiar mercies given to the redeemed, they lack the necessary condition to enjoy outward mercies. In sum, Flavel writes, “that thy soul is not yet in Christ, is thy greatest misery; but that yet it may be in Christ, is an unspeakable mercy.”⁵⁴

Given his view of the nature of man with respect to sin and misery, Flavel prioritizes spiritual and internal mercies over material and external mercies. Certainly, outward compassions are not unimportant to Flavel—estates, wealth, liberty, honors, and pleasures. “Temporal mercies have their value, it is no small mercy to have our estates, liberties, and lives secured from rapine and violence.”⁵⁵ He praises God for rescuing him when he was caught in an ocean storm. He even celebrates the special day of mercy in England when religious liberty was granted. Yet, he considers them to be lesser (or

⁵¹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:190.

⁵² Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:258. Similarly, Ryle makes a distinction between Christ’s general compassion and his special compassion. “Let it be noted that we see here an example of the broad distinction that ought to be drawn between Christ’s general love of compassion which he feels towards all mankind, and his special love of election which he feels towards his own members.” J. C. Ryle, *The Power and Sympathy of Christ* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2018), 21.

⁵³ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:201.

⁵⁴ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:546.

⁵⁵ John Flavel, *Mount Pisgah, A Sermon Preached at the Public Thanksgiving, Feb. 14th, 1688-89, for England’s Deliverance from Popery*, in *Works*, 4:313. Flavel celebrates the religious freedom given after the glorious revolution in England in 1688 where king James II was replaced by a Protestant.

inferior) mercies. For Flavel, “soul mercies” (or spiritual mercies) are the best mercies. The soul is that vital, spiritual, and eternal substance, capable of espousal to Christ.⁵⁶ While sound physical health is certainly a mercy to be enjoyed, the soul is more excellent than the body and, therefore, necessitates a greater concern. “If men would be glad to be rid of such dreadful diseases in their bodies, and to be restored to soundness, ease, and health; how much more should you be glad to be rid of your corruptions, and have the rectitude, ease, and pleasure of your souls restored again?”⁵⁷ Indeed, Flavel believes we express love for our physical bodies by obtaining union with Christ.⁵⁸

For Flavel, there are several reasons for this hierarchy. First, outward mercies are temporal, while spiritual mercies are eternal. Second, outward mercies serve spiritual mercies: “Every sickness, and every danger of life which you have escaped in those days, was a marvelous escape from the everlasting wrath of God. . . . So it hath been with you, the thread of life . . . hath held till the bonds of union betwixt Christ and your souls were fastened.”⁵⁹ Third, outward mercies cannot be comfortably enjoyed without those spiritual mercies found in Christ. “What would your lives, Christians, be worth to you, if this mercy were cut off from you? There would be little sweetness or savour in all your outward mercies, were it not for this mercy that sweetens them all.”⁶⁰ Fourth, outward mercies are designed to produce the spiritual fruit of a sanctified soul. In bestowing them, God may produce a melting heart of thankfulness. In removing them, he may lead his people into deeper faith whereby they respond with greater faith. Fifth, outward mercies

⁵⁶ “It is a marriageable creature to Christ now, capable of espousals to the Son of God; upon which account it is that Christ so earnestly seeks its love, and sues for its consent. Now this is a dignity beyond all other creatures in heaven or earth; no angel in heaven, no other creature but the soul of man on earth is capable of espousals to Christ.” Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:128.

⁵⁷ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:135.

⁵⁸ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:608.

⁵⁹ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:82.

⁶⁰ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:258.

flow from the greater mercy in Christ, as he is the fountain of all mercy.

United to the Fountain

In addition to describing Christ as the fountain of mercy and compassion, Flavel calls him the “fountain-head of all consolations,” a “storehouse of mercies,” the “fountain of pity,” the “plank of mercy,” and the “ocean from which all the streams of God’s goodness flow.”⁶¹ In these descriptions, Flavel prioritizes the source over the supply, the spring over the stream, the person over the privileges. “The gospel offers Christ orderly to sinners, first his person, then his privileges. God first gives his Son, and then with him, or as a consequent of that gift, he gives us all things. . . . Union with Christ is, in order of nature, antecedent to the communication of his privileges.”⁶² Notably, Flavel does not divide the privileges from the person.⁶³ He writes, “Christ and his benefits go inseparably and undividedly together.”⁶⁴ Yet, union with the person of Christ functions as the principal act wherein God applies salvation and supplies all his merciful benefits.⁶⁵ Aside from the antecedent privileges, what then, does Flavel mean when he

⁶¹ For the “fountain-head of all consolations,” see Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:251. For the “storehouse of mercies,” see Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:152. For the “fountain of pity,” see John Flavel, *A Caution to Seamen: A Dissuasive Against Several Horrid and Detestable Sins*, in *Works*, 5:341. For the “plank of mercy,” see Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:221. For the “ocean of all goodness,” see Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:315.

⁶² Flavel goes on to argue that it is certainly lawful for one to have an eye towards the benefits of Christ, notwithstanding those who to come to faith out of fear for their own eternal safety. Yet, even in the internal confusion, the proper order concerns first to accept the person, then the communication of his benefits. Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:112.

⁶³ Gaffin describes Calvin’s formulation as a “triangulation” of union, justification, and sanctification. He states, “There is no partial union with Christ, no sharing in only some of his benefits. If believers do not have the whole Christ, they have no Christ; unless they share in all of his benefits they share in none of them.” Richard B. Gaffin, “Justification and Union with Christ,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2015). Flavel strikes a very similar chord, noting that not only are the privileges inseparable from the person, they are also inseparable from one another.

⁶⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:17.

⁶⁵ A considerable issue within reformed soteriology consists of the question of priority between justification and union with Christ. Tipton argues that the theology of Westminster seminary posits union with Christ as the larger context for justification, noting that “there is no justification for believers prior to or apart from Spirit-engendered faith-union with Christ.” Lane G Tipton, “Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards Revisited: Union with Christ and Justification Sola Fide,” *Westminster*

affirms that believers are united to the merciful fountain himself?

According to Flavel, Christ is the mercy of mercies. He is styled “the mercy,” being the principal or primary mercy, all others functioning subordinately. He states,

Of secondary and subordinate mercies, there are multitudes, both temporal, respecting the body, and spiritual, respecting the soul; but the principal and primary mercy is but one, and that is Christ, the first-born of mercy; the capital mercy, the comprehensive root-mercy, from whom are all other mercies; without whom no drop of saving mercy can flow to any of the sons of men; and in whom are all the tender bowels of divine mercy yearning upon poor sinners.⁶⁶

There are three reasons why Christ is “the mercy of mercies.” First, he is the prime fruit of mercy. Comparatively speaking, receiving the person of Christ is equivalent to receiving the choice and chief fruit among the harvest. Second, he is called “the mercy of mercies” because all other mercies come by way of him. “Christ is the medium of all divine communications, the channel of grace, through him are both . . . the flows of mercy from God to us, and the returns of praise from us to God.”⁶⁷ There is no saving mercy but that which comes through Christ. Third, he is “the mercy of mercies” because all other saving mercies derive their nature, value, sweetness, and duration from him. Hence, Christ is not merely a compassionate Savior by virtue of his work and benefits, but by his person which, by way of union, becomes the first compassionate mercy to sinners.

Additionally, Flavel enumerates twelve properties of Christ as the mercy of mercies. First, he is a free mercy, having been given to the ill-deserving by the benevolence of God. He is also a full mercy, containing the full entirety of what is necessary for his people. Third, Christ is a seasonable mercy, given in the fullness of time (incarnationally) and applied particularly according to the wisdom of God. Fourth, Christ

Theological Journal 75, no. 1 (2013): 6.

⁶⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:203.

⁶⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:203.

is a necessary mercy, as the soul is entirely dependent upon him for life. Fifth, he is a fountain-mercy from which all springs of mercy flow. Sixth, he is a satisfying mercy. The restless lack nothing when they drink of his goodness. “Christ bounds and terminates the vast desires of the soul. He is the very Sabbath of the soul.”⁶⁸ Seventh, Christ is a peculiar mercy, in that he is applied to a remnant—only those who believe in his name. Eighth, Christ is a suitable mercy, “suited in every respect to all our needs and wants.”⁶⁹ We are enemies, but he is the reconciliation. We are condemned, but he is righteousness. We are weary, but he is rest. Ninth, he is an astonishing and wonderful mercy, as his very person in his humiliation and exaltation is a great wonder and mystery. Tenth, Christ is a matchless mercy. Compared with all other comforts and enjoyments, “you will find none in heaven nor on earth to equal him: he is more than all externals, as the light of the sun is more than that of a candle.”⁷⁰ Christ is also our unsearchable mercy, of which no one can fully fathom the love of Christ. Last, he is an everlasting mercy. Those in union with Christ never lose this durable mercy, for he is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

With All His Offices

Flavel considers the threefold office of Christ in *The Fountain of Life*, focusing primarily on his person and work. These offices point to Christ’s divine nature and delineate the roles by which Christ accomplishes the work of salvation. Flavel does not divorce Christ’s offices of prophet, priest, and king from the application of redemption. Instead, he argues that it is impossible to receive Christ apart from his offices, and that his offices cannot be separated from one another. “Christ is offered to us in the gospel entirely and undividedly, as clothed with all his offices, priestly, prophetic, and regal;

⁶⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:205.

⁶⁹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:206.

⁷⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:206.

as Christ Jesus the Lord, and so the true believer receives him.”⁷¹ Flavel describes the necessity of the three-fold office for sinners, stating, “His ignorance makes him necessary and desirable to him as a prophet. His guilt makes him necessary as a priest. His strong and powerful lusts and corruptions make him necessary as a king.”⁷² When the believer receives “the mercy of mercies” by way of union, he receives the full complement of his offices. “As without any one of these offices, the work of our salvation could not be completed, so without acceptance of Christ in them all, our union with him by faith cannot be completed.”⁷³ In what ways does Christ in this three-fold office express his compassionate mercy to those united to him by faith?

Prophet. As stated in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Christ executes the office of a prophet by “revealing to us by his Word and Spirit the will of God for our salvation.”⁷⁴ He is, according to Flavel, a fountain of light, revealing God’s will “variously” (in various ways prior to the Incarnation), “gradually,” “plainly,” and “authoritatively.” Christ also dispenses the Word “purely” (without any error) and “fully” (not withholding anything necessary for salvation). Additionally, Flavel states that Christ executes this office “tenderly” and “sweetly,” not desiring to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax.⁷⁵ Flavel notes that Christ knows how to speak a word in the

⁷¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:110.

⁷² Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:110.

⁷³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:111.

⁷⁴ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:182.

⁷⁵ Flavel references Isaiah 42:3, “a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.”

right season, revealing “the mind of God in a sweet, affectionate, and taking manner.”⁷⁶ He adds that Christ is “a tender-hearted minister, full of compassion to souls.”⁷⁷

To unite a soul to Christ, the Holy Spirit must first illumine the mind to understand the things of God. Man’s natural estate (arising from the fall) is marked by ignorance and blindness. In other words, original sin darkens the mind of man, rendering him unable to know and desire God. “These things of God are not only contrary to corrupt and carnal reason, but they are also above right reason. Grace indeed useth nature, but nature can do nothing without grace.”⁷⁸ Christ, the prophet, not only illumines the mind, but inclines the heart to receive and embrace Christ as offered in the gospel. Flavel goes on to argue that it is a great mercy for Christ to provide light to those walking in darkness that they might be united to him. “And is it not yet farther encouraging to you that hitherto he hath mercifully continued you under the means of light.”⁷⁹ As a necessary antecedent to faith, Christ enlightens the mind to know him, that the heart might embrace him.

Priest. Flavel describes Christ’s priesthood under two acts: (1) his oblation (or offering); and (2) his intercession. Christ executes the office of a priest “in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us.”⁸⁰ His oblation accomplishes redemption, as it is an all-sufficient sacrifice that atones for sin and reconciles the sinner unto God. His intercession ensures the application of his redemptive work. Christ operates in this

⁷⁶ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:125.

⁷⁷ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:129.

⁷⁸ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:122.

⁷⁹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:140.

⁸⁰ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:183.

intercessory capacity for those who are united to him by faith—“those that the Father himself loves, and his heart is propense and ready enough to grant the best and greatest of mercies to.”⁸¹ How does Flavel articulate this compassionate and merciful intercession for those in union with Christ?

Hence our enjoyment of God’s mercies is first secured by Christ’s oblation and then sustained by his intercession. “The continuation of all your mercies and comforts, outward as well as inward, is the fruit of his intercession in heaven for you.”⁸² If not for Christ, every sin would put an end to God’s mercies. He is our advocate (1 John 2:1–2). “This stops all pleas, and procures new pardons for new sins. . . . New sins do not irritate our former pardons, nor cut off our privileges settled upon us in Christ.”⁸³ For Flavel, union with Christ conveys an interest in his properties.⁸⁴ Whatever is in him (whether it is power, knowledge or mercy), it is for his people. Hence, those in union with Christ receive the eternal continuance of his mercies by way of his priestly intercession.

King. Flavel associates Christ’s royal office with the application of redemption. “For what he revealed as a Prophet, he purchased as a Priest; and what he so revealed and purchased as a Prophet and Priest, he applies as a king.”⁸⁵ There are two aspects of Christ’s kingly office: 1) subduing souls under his spiritual government; and 2) ruling all things according to his providence for the good of his people. According to Flavel, this means that there are two kingdoms: (1) one internal and spiritual; and (2) the other providential. As a king, Christ is a tender-hearted ruler. “Another privilege of

⁸¹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:171.

⁸² Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:452.

⁸³ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:452.

⁸⁴ John Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings, or The Best Work in the Worst Times*, in *Works*, 6:80.

⁸⁵ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:199.

Christ's subjects, is, a merciful and tender bearing of their burdens and infirmities. They have a meek and patient king. . . . He is one that can have compassion upon the ignorant, and them that are out of the way."⁸⁶ Flavel urges his readers to forsake their slavery to the cruel tyrant of sin and slavish fear, embracing the merciful royal master by submitting to his mercy.

Flavel describes three aspects of Christ's compassion in his kingly office. First, Christ exhibits patience in waiting for sinners to submit to his rule. "Still he waiteth that he may be gracious, and is exalted that he may have compassion."⁸⁷ Though endowed with all power and authority, Christ still awaits the opportunity to enter the soul, with free submission to his government. Having entered the soul, this king tenderly and sweetly pacifies the disquieted spirit and instills peace with fatherly love.⁸⁸ Third, Christ rules with providential tenderness. He urges his congregation to "study the tenderness and compassions of Christ over his afflicted."⁸⁹ He asks them to consider what cup they might drink if the devil were in charge of mixing the cup. There would be not one drop of mercy, either of sparing mercies or delivering mercies. Instead, there are great mercies mixed with great troubles, all given by God's ruling providence for the good of those united to him by faith.

The Privileges of Mercy

The person and privileges of Christ are inseparable. Flavel describes the privileges as "innumerable," "inestimable," and "unspeakable."⁹⁰ They flow from the

⁸⁶ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:207.

⁸⁷ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:202.

⁸⁸ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:205–06.

⁸⁹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:222.

⁹⁰ Flavel uses these terms throughout his writings. For example, he will use "inestimable" to describe the privileges of Christ in *The Method of Grace*. See Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:16. For an example of his use of "innumerable," see John Flavel, *The Righteous Man's Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:393. He will speak of the "unspeakable" privileges of Christ *The Fountain of Life*. See Flavel, *The*

believer's union with Christ. We have no benefit apart from Christ. "In teaching this lesson, the Lord, in mercy, unteaches and blots out that dangerous principle, by which the greatest part of the Christianized world do perish, viz. that the death of Christ is, in itself, effectual to salvation, though a man be never regenerated or united to him by saving faith."⁹¹

Introductory or Preparatory Mercies

Flavel frequently uses the terminology of "introductive mercies" to describe those mercies which God extends to sinners prior to their union with Christ. "When one mercy is an introductive leading mercy to many more that are greater than itself; that mercy which is so, though in itself it were never so small, well deserves the title of a great mercy."⁹² For example, Flavel points to the way God prepares nations for his gospel work. More particularly, God uses "introductive" mercies to lead sinners to place their faith in Christ. These include the following.

Convicting mercies. Flavel describes the unregenerates' life as characterized by presumption, carnal security, and false joy. They live with this delusion because they rest on church privileges, natural ignorance, false evidences of God's love, and slight workings of the gospel. Moreover, they appease their conscience by comparing themselves with others. They are deluded by Satan.⁹³ But God has supplied the law to operate on their hardened hearts. "It works suddenly; strikes like a dart through the hearts

Fountain of Life, in *Works*, 1:452.

⁹¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:314.

⁹² Flavel, *Mount Pisgah*, in *Works*, 4:315. In this context, Flavel calls on the church to rejoice in the fact that a Protestant king sits upon the throne in England. This civil and public mercy, in Flavel's estimation, ought to be improved upon by the church to bring about greater salvific mercies.

⁹³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:290–91.

and consciences of men.”⁹⁴ For Flavel, there is a great efficacy in God’s Word. It possesses an “awakening” efficacy to arouse the conscience, an “enlightening” efficacy to illumine the mind, a “convincing” efficacy to set the soul in order, and a “soul-wounding and heart-cutting” efficacy to draw sinners to Christ.⁹⁵ In Flavel’s estimation, this efficacy is not inherent to any natural object, but is due to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Flavel also calls this Spirit-empowered work through the law an “introductive” mercy. “It is not only a peculiar mercy, but it is a leading, introductive mercy, to all other spiritual mercies that follow it to all eternity.”⁹⁶ This makes conviction for sin a great mercy. “A seasonable and full conviction whereof will be the greatest mercy.”⁹⁷ Flavel argues that there can be no engrafting into Christ without conviction. “And when the Lord intends to graff a soul into Christ the first work about it, is cutting work . . . no cyon is engrafted without cutting, no soul united with Christ without a cuttings sense of sin and misery.”⁹⁸ Though the sinner may be troubled by a sense of sin, it is a compassionate mercy, intended to arouse and awaken from spiritual slumber. Once united to Christ by faith, the regenerate view their past sorrows and troubles as a great mercy from Christ.

Drawing mercies. In addition to the external exposition of the law, Flavel posits a necessary internal means for salvation, namely, the drawing of the soul by the Holy Spirit. Consolidating the various components of the application of redemption, Flavel writes, “No saving benefit is to be had by Christ without union with his person, no

⁹⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:296.

⁹⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:296–97.

⁹⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:294. See also John Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity, or The Signs of Grace and Symptoms of Hypocrisy*, in *Works*, 5:594.

⁹⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:13.

⁹⁸ Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:146.

union with his person without faith, no faith ordinarily wrought without the preaching of the gospel by Christ's ambassadors, their preaching hath no saving efficacy without God's drawings."⁹⁹ He characterizes God's "drawing" as a gradual, congruous, powerful, effectual, and final work of the Holy Spirit. In his estimation, this drawing work is wholly supernatural. It is contrary to corrupt human nature and the strongholds set against the Christian faith through Satan's subtlety. Flavel believes the drawing work of the Spirit is an illuminating work, whereby he opens the sinner's eyes to behold his sin and misery. It is also an authoritative call, full of majesty, power, encouraging promises dreadful threatenings, moving examples of those who have come to Christ, and an effectual persuading that overcomes objections.

The drawing of the Holy Spirit is an expression of God's mercy. Flavel notes that it is not merely unbelief that hinders a sinner from coming to Christ, but it is a matter of the will. "You see where it sticks, not in a simple inability to believe, but in an inability complicated with enmity; they neither can come, nor will come to Christ."¹⁰⁰ Hence, it necessitates a profound mercy of God to draw the unwilling sinner and engraft him into Christ. Flavel states that the "aversion of the will and affections from God is one of the main roots of original sin. . . . Oh unparalleled mercy and goodness! Not only to prepare such a glory as this for an unworthy soul, but to put forth the exceeding greatness of thy power, afterwards to draw an unwilling soul to the enjoyment of it."¹⁰¹ While Flavel readily acknowledges the Spirit's work in drawing the sinner to mercy—namely Christ and his salvific benefits—he also recognizes the compassion of God in the drawing itself.

⁹⁹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:67.

¹⁰⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:79.

¹⁰¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:80.

Providential mercies. Flavel identifies several mercies that assist in drawing the sinner to Christ. First, it is a great mercy to live in a nation and city in which the gospel is openly and freely proclaimed. “What a mercy it is, to have your lot providentially cast under the gospel; to be born under, and bred up with the means of instruments of conversion and salvation.”¹⁰² Second, it is a mercy when God lengthens the sinner’s life under the preaching of the gospel. Many perish without ever hearing the word of salvation. Thus, it is a providential mercy when God preserves a sinner’s life so that he might hear the gospel and come to Christ. Third, it is a mercy to be raised by godly parents who labor to instill the knowledge of the Christian faith in their children. Fourth, it is a mercy that God withholds his wrath against some in order to bring salvation to others. “God doth not only exercise this power in a temporary suspension of his wrath against some, who, alas, must feel it at last; but he delays the execution of his wrath in a design of mercy towards others, that they may never feel it.”¹⁰³

Merciful Privileges

At conversion, or the day of espousal, the believer participates in all that Christ purchased by his humiliation and exaltation. “Thy union with his person brings interest in his properties along with it. Whatever he is, or hath, it is for thee: his eye of knowledge, arm of power, bowels of pity, it is all for thee.”¹⁰⁴ Because these privileges flow from union with Christ, Flavel often calls them “covenant” privileges. Hence, they are singularly reserved for God’s children in Christ—those who have been engrafted into the life-giving root. As the Father gave the Son as the mercy of mercies, he will never withhold any privilege from his children.¹⁰⁵ Flavel often uses the term “mercy” when

¹⁰² Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:235.

¹⁰³ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:64.

¹⁰⁴ Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings*, in *Works*, 6:80.

¹⁰⁵ Flavel acknowledges that God does extend some mercies to the unregenerate. For example,

speaking of privilege, thereby signifying the undeserved provision he makes for his people. For example, he speaks of union with Christ as a peculiar privilege, a mercy kept from the world that is perishing.¹⁰⁶

The mercy of communion. Flavel argues that there is a two-fold communion with Christ: the state and the experience—the first being foundational to the second. The state of communion flows from the believers’ union with Christ whereby he fellowships (or participates) in all that Christ is.¹⁰⁷ While they do not share in the essential nature of God nor the glory of Christ’s mediatorial work, they do have fellowship with him in his names, titles, righteousness, holiness, death, resurrection, and heavenly glory. Actual communion, on the other hand, consists of a “spiritual correspondency betwixt Christ and the soul. God lets forth influences upon our souls, and we, by the assistance of his Spirit, make returns again unto God.”¹⁰⁸ Flavel affirms that there is real intercourse between the visible and invisible worlds. There are three ways (or methods) in which believers enjoy this communion: (1) in the contemplation of his attributes; (2) in the exercise of religious duties; (3) in the consideration of his providences. In these ways, believers experience God’s mercies. “It is ease in all pains, sweet and sensible ease to a troubled soul. . . . the opening of the soul by acts of communion with God, gives sensible ease to a burdened soul: griefs are eased by groans heavenward.”¹⁰⁹ As Flavel states elsewhere, believers receive the storehouse of Christ’s mercies by way of communion with him.¹¹⁰

Considering the contemplation of God’s attributes specifically, Flavel argues

he states that God gives common man the privilege of speech and rationality, privileges not given to animals. He would also acknowledge the privilege of life and any good providence given by God.

¹⁰⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:90.

¹⁰⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:145. See also 4:237.

¹⁰⁸ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:240.

¹⁰⁹ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:254.

¹¹⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:152.

that God makes impressions on the soul as his people meditate of his goodness and mercy. The heart melts into thankfulness to, and admiration of, God. This leads to greater obedience. Flavel acknowledges a double channel of God's goodness, external and internal. Externally, God extends mercies to the body. Internally, he gives mercies to our souls. On the one hand, believers contemplate God's mercies in times of sickness and danger. On the other hand, they meditate on his deliverances from sin and misery (especially eternal ruin). "You see in these instances, what effects the goodness of God, even in inferior, outward mercies useth to produce in sanctified hearts."¹¹¹ Speaking comparatively, Flavel argues that the terror of hell does not thaw the heart as does an apprehension of God's mercies.

The chief merciful privileges. In his exposition of 1 Corinthians 1:30, Flavel describes the chief privileges in the application of redemption. Christ has been made to the believer "wisdom," "righteousness," "sanctification," and "redemption." He communicates these mercies in three different ways: (1) righteousness by imputation; (2) wisdom and sanctification by renovation; and (3) redemption by glorification. These privileges answer "a fourfold misery lying upon sinful man, viz. ignorance, guilt, pollution, and the whole train of miserable consequences and effects."¹¹² Because our understanding has been darkened, Christ imparts wisdom by means of the Spirit of illumination so that we see our sin and misery. Righteousness, on the other hand, denotes the mercy of justification wherein God imputes the righteousness of Christ to the sinner, dissolving the punishment and serving as "a solid foundation for a well-settled peace of conscience firmly established."¹¹³ These mercies, although wonderful, are incomplete, for

¹¹¹ Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:242.

¹¹² Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:16.

¹¹³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:16. Yuille describes the various facets of this justifying privilege including substitution, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, penalty-bearing work of Christ, pardon, and fulfillment of all the righteous requirements of the law. J. Stephen Yuille, *The Inner*

the soul has need of sanctification whereby Christ removes the effects and consequences of sin.¹¹⁴ Redemption is the sum of mercies, the work being complete in glorification. The soul is finally delivered from all sin and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

Consequently, Flavel sees the day of conversion as the day of mercies. Regeneration marks the putting on of Christ and invites a multitude of mercies. “In this day, Christ cometh into the soul, and he comes not empty, but brings with him all his treasures of wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption. Troops of mercies, yea, of the best of mercies come with him.”¹¹⁵ He calls it “the day of espousal.” Comparing it to Solomon’s coronation, he draws the picture of a royal diadem placed on the king’s head. By consenting to the government of Christ, believers place glory and honor upon the Son of God and receive the abundance of his mercies. In his estimation, it is a day of singular gladness and joy, as the treasures of heaven attend the repentant sinner. These mercies are not to be compared to, or exchanged for, all the kingdoms of the world. “Eternity itself will but suffice to bless God for the mercies of this one day.”¹¹⁶ In sum, joy accompanies believers on the day of their conversion, as they receive these choice merciful privileges in Christ.

Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel’s Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), 48.

¹¹⁴ The notion of the association between union with Christ and sanctification has been lost in modern evangelicalism, yet is central to the reformed view. Fesko argues that sanctification comes through union with Christ. Appealing to John 15:1–17, Fesko understands the metaphor of abiding in the “true vine” to mean that union with Christ “creates the context in which the sinner is progressively conformed to the image of Christ.” J. V. Fesko, “Sanctification and Union with Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (July 2010): 202. Contending for a reformed perspective of sanctification, Ferguson argues that there are two central features to sanctification. First, Christ is our sanctification. Second, it is only “through union with Christ that sanctification is accomplished in us.” Sinclair Ferguson, “The Reformed View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1989), 48.

¹¹⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:30.

¹¹⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:30.

The mercy of faith. Faith is no small mercy in Flavel’s estimation, being the second band (or ligament) in union with Christ. “It is the bond of union; the instrument of justification; the spring of spiritual peace and joy; the means of spiritual life and subsistence; and therefore the great scope and drift of the gospel.”¹¹⁷ Faith is a high and glorious privilege that includes understanding Christ and his mediatorial work, followed by assenting with the heart and consenting with the will. It is such faith that leads to salvation. Flavel writes, “The soul is the life of the body, faith is the life of the soul, and Christ is the life of faith.”¹¹⁸ It is, according to Flavel, the “phoenix-grace” and Christ himself the “phoenix-mercy.”¹¹⁹ In sum, it is the bond whereby the believer receives Christ alone for his salvation.

Flavel distinguishes between two different aspects of faith. “Faith and sense of faith, are two distinct and separable mercies: you may have truly received Christ, and not receive the knowledge or assurance of it.”¹²⁰ For Flavel, assurance is a sweet enjoyment—“inexpressible and inconceivable for it is a mercy above all estimation.”¹²¹ While all believers receive the salvific mercies of Christ, not all enjoy the mercy of assurance in the same measure. “Certainly, there is a sweetness in the assurance of faith, that few men have the privilege to taste; and they that do, can find no words able to express it to another’s understanding.”¹²² Though believers may not have a strong assurance in the subjective sense, their condition is secure because they have objectively received the bond of union with Christ—the Holy Spirit. They have some evidences of

¹¹⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:118.

¹¹⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:104.

¹¹⁹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:152.

¹²⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:123.

¹²¹ Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:451.

¹²² Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:451.

this in their mourning for sin and humbling by affliction.

Even so, Flavel argues that the smallest degree of faith is a great mercy. The smallest measure of “this mercy alone is enough to balance all other wants and inconveniences of this life.”¹²³ There are four reasons he provides for this assertion. First, the smallest degree of faith receives Christ. Having done so, believers receive the richest gift along with all other purchases and privileges. Second, the smallest degree of faith brings us to a state of justification. Because faith unites the soul to Christ, there is no condemnation for the believer. The degree of faith is inconsequential. Third, Flavel states that the smallest measure of faith is a greater mercy than all outward mercies. “They have houses and lands, yea, crowns and scepters, but no faith, no Christ, no pardon.”¹²⁴ Fourth, the least measure of saving faith is a great mercy because it requires a supernatural work to produce it. Thus, it testifies to the Spirit’s work. Hence, any degree of faith is a glorious privilege of God—a mercy only for those united to Christ.

A merciful providence. In addition to the above, Flavel acknowledges that it is a great privilege to be adopted into God’s family and know that all things are ordered for our good. He often describes God’s providence as “merciful” (or tender). He acknowledges that God even orchestrates afflictive providences for the profit and benefit of the saints. “It is the great support and solace of the saints in all the distresses that befall them here, that there is a wise spirit sitting in all the wheels of motion, and governing the most excentrical creatures, and their most pernicious designs to blessed and happy issues.”¹²⁵ Essentially, God’s tender providences are compassionate mercies to those in union with Christ, all things working for the good of his people.

Regarding merciful providences that lead to salvation, Flavel enumerates four.

¹²³ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:103.

¹²⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:127.

¹²⁵ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:342-43.

First, God governs every operation in the formation and protection of the individual in the womb. He structures the composition of the body and brings the rare jewel of the soul into possession of the body. “Look then (but not proudly) upon thy out-side and inside; see and admire what providence hath done for thee.”¹²⁶ Second, God ensures that the individual is born in a country where the ordinary means of salvation are practiced. Third, God provides a family that educates the individual in the faith. “You are bound to reckon it among your chief mercies.”¹²⁷ For Flavel, this is a double channel of mercy, in that it provides temporal mercies and spiritual mercies through intercession and instruction. Fourth, God orders the means and occasions of conversion. In Flavel’s estimation, this not only includes the methods used to awaken the soul, but also all providences given to complete the work of salvation unto perfection.

Flavel also notes several merciful providences in the care of God’s people in the world. First, God grants a particular vocation to each. This serves to meet their needs, while enabling them to provide for others. Second, God guides and orders all relationships (especially friendships) for counsel. He also provides a marriage companion for their blessing. Third, God cares for the families of the saints by making seasonable provision for them, wisely and consistently giving all that they need. Fourth, God cares for his people “in their preservation from the snares and temptations of sin, by its preventing care over them.”¹²⁸ Fifth, God tenderly cares for the bodies of the saints, providentially preserving them from many dangers. Sixth, God gives the saints aid and assistance in the great work of mortification. While the Spirit accomplishes this work internally, providence assists it externally, often employing afflictive providence for the purging of sin.

¹²⁶ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:364.

¹²⁷ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:370.

¹²⁸ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:398.

The Season of Mercy

While Flavel depicts Christ as the tender-hearted Savior, a compassionate physician full of bowels of mercy towards sinners, he also consistently emphasizes the need to close with Christ. For Flavel, there is a limited season to claim the mercies of God, after which all hope is lost. “O what will you do when the season of mercy, and all hopes of mercy shall end together! When God shall become inaccessible, inexorable, and irreconcilable to you for evermore.”¹²⁹ Throughout his works, Flavel refers to this season as “the door of mercy,” upon which Christ knocks to gain entrance to the soul. If the door is not opened, it will be irrevocably and eternally shut. Once the season of mercy has passed, the soul lies beyond the possibility of pardon and salvation.

Flavel unabashedly depicts the horror of condemnation for those against whom the door of mercy is shut. His depiction of God’s judgment in no way undermines his celebration of God’s compassion. Rather, it serves to accentuate it, while reinforcing the importance of closing with Christ. Flavel writes:

Consider what a terrible thing it is to lie under the condemnation of God; the most terrible things in nature cannot shadow forth the misery of such a state; put all sicknesses, all poverty, all reproaches, the torments invented by all tyrants into one scale, and the condemnation of God into the other, and they will be all found lighter than a feather. Condemnation is the sentence of God, the great and terrible God; it is a sentence shutting you up to everlasting wrath: it is a sentence never to be reversed, but by the application of Christ in the season thereof. O souls! You cannot bear the wrath of God.¹³⁰

For Flavel, the greatness of God’s compassion can be seen more clearly against the backdrop of the immensity and eternity of hell. There is no greater mercy than deliverance from condemnation. For this reason, Flavel regards the seasons for salvation as golden opportunities. “There is a day on which our eternal happiness depends.”¹³¹

Additionally, Flavel understands that the intensity of God’s judgment

¹²⁹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:65.

¹³⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:259.

¹³¹ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:15.

corresponds to the mercies that he has extended. In accord with the theology of the Westminster Standards, he affirms that some transgressions are more heinous than others in the sight of God. Abusing (or rejecting) God's mercies is a particularly egregious sin. Flavel writes, "Now among all the aggravations of the torments of hell, none can be greater than the reflections of damned souls upon the abused patience and grace of Christ: those that had the best means, the loudest calls, and the longest day under the gospel, will certainly have the hottest place in hell."¹³² Flavel depicts the reality of eternal torment in order to compel his hearers to turn to Christ to receive mercy.

The Privilege of Sympathy

For Flavel, union with Christ implies mutual interest among the members of his body. For this reason, he calls believers "Christ's fellows" and "fellow-members of the same body."¹³³ They partake together of Christ in their union and communion with him. As Flavel states, "Christ and the saints are in common one with another."¹³⁴ While Christ stands above his fellows in glory and holiness, believers receive the dignity of becoming Christ's fellows. It stands to reason that Flavel sees the doctrine of union with Christ as key to understanding Christ's sympathy with his people. Summarily stated, while the incarnation functions as a necessary condition for sympathy, union with Christ constitutes the chief operative context for the privilege of sympathy. "The sympathy that is betwixt Christ and believers, proves a union betwixt them; Christ and the saints smile and sigh together."¹³⁵

¹³² Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:80.

¹³³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:141.

¹³⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:142.

¹³⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:36.

Union with Christ and Sympathy

For Flavel, sympathy means to suffer with another. Importantly however, the mutual suffering occurs because of a prior unity.¹³⁶ In other words, the unity does not consist of sympathy nor does sympathy cause the unity. Rather, sympathy results from and strengthens the unity. Flavel insists on the believer's union with Christ, wherein there is a connectedness of spiritual relations. "The reality of communion betwixt God and the saints is undeniably evinced from all the spiritual relations into which God hath taken them."¹³⁷ Christ is the head and believers are the members of his body. If one constituent part (or member) experiences affliction, the head is necessarily and sympathetically affected. Christ "is touched"—and touched sensibly since he has assumed our nature—whenever the saints are affected by one burden or another.¹³⁸ Flavel's understanding of the relationship between the body and soul further clarifies his conceptualization of sympathy.

Body and soul. Flavel holds to a bipartite view of human nature: body and soul. While the body is the material substance, the soul is the immaterial and immortal substance of the person endued with understanding, affections and will. Flavel describes the body as the garment (or tabernacle) of the soul, and the soul as the "jewel" of the body, because it animates the body. For this reason, Flavel sees the soul as possessing greater value than the body. Despite this, he believes they exist in a profound and mysterious unity. "There is no greater mystery in nature, than the union betwixt soul and

¹³⁶ John Owen states that sympathy "includes a concern in the troubles, or sufferings, or evils of others, upon the account of concernment in any common interest wherein persons are united, as it is in the natural body." John Owen, *Hebrews: Exposition of Hebrews Chapters 3:7–5:14*, Vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992) 439.

¹³⁷ Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:246.

¹³⁸ Flavel often appeals to Acts 9:4–5 where Christ asks Saul why he is persecuting him. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Flavel writes, "How doth Christ sensibly feel our sufferings, or we his, if there be not a mystical union betwixt him and us?" Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:36.

body.”¹³⁹ As a result of that unity, there is a communion and communication between them. “Nothing is more sensible, plain, and evident, than that there is a reciprocal communication betwixt the soul and body. The body doth as really (though we know not how) affect the soul with its dispositions, as the soul influences it with life and motion.”¹⁴⁰

According to Flavel, the soul is affectionately inclined to the body. He argues that this tender love is so strong that it is the measure by which believers are to love one another.¹⁴¹ Speaking of the friendship between body and soul, he writes, “Two such dear and intimate friends as the soul and body are, cannot part without some tears, groans, or sighs; and those more deep and emphatical than the groans and sighs of the living use to be.”¹⁴² Flavel argues that it is unnatural for the soul to be separated from the body. He cites several evidences of the soul’s tender affection for the body. For example, the soul cares for the body, working to provide the things needful for its nourishment and raiment. Flavel also describes the soul’s love for the body in the fears it has over it and on account of it, concerned over the dangers the body poses to itself and to the soul. The fear of separation at death and the desire of reunion also serve as evidences of the soul’s inclination and love for the body.

Furthermore, Flavel argues that the soul expresses its affection for the body by way of sympathy. His remarks on this point eloquently express this affectionate reality between the body and soul:

The soul manifests its dear love and affection to the body, by its sympathy, and compassionate feeling of all its burdens: whatever touches the body, by way of injury, affects the soul also by way of sympathy. The soul and body are as strings of two musical instruments set exactly at one height; if one be touched, the other

¹³⁹ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:499.

¹⁴⁰ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:521.

¹⁴¹ Flavel refers to Matthew 19:19, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

¹⁴² Flavel, *Mount Pisgah*, in *Works*, 3:64.

trembles. They laugh and cry, are sick and well together. This is a wonderful mystery, and a rare secret (as a learned man observes) how the soul comes to sympathize with the body, and to have not only a knowledge, but as it were a feeling of its necessities and infirmities; how this fleshly lump comes to affect, and make its deep impressions upon a creature of so different a nature from it, as the soul or spirit is. . . . If any members of the body, though but the lowest and meanest, be in pain and misery, the soul is presently affected with it, and commands the eyes to watch yea, to weep, the hands to bind it up with all tenderness, and defend it from the least injurious touch; the lips to complain of its misery, and beg pity and help from others for it. If the body be in danger, how are the faculties of the soul, understanding, memory, invention, etc. employed with utmost strength and concernment for its deliverance! This is a real and unexceptionable evidence of its dear and tender love to the body.

Embedded in Flavel's reflections resides a musical illustration of sympathy not unfamiliar to other academic disciplines in the seventeenth century.¹⁴³ Yet, this conceptualization of sympathy between body and soul makes sense of Flavel's distinction between idiosyncratic suffering and sympathetic suffering. While idiosyncratic suffering relates to the burdens "we bear upon our own proper account and score," sympathetic suffering relates to the burdens arising on another's account. In sum, the affectionate unity between the body and soul provides the operative context by which body or soul may suffer sympathetically, inherently affected with the burdens, pains and experiences of the other.

Union with Christ. Flavel makes several important assertions regarding the relationship between sympathy and union with Christ. First, union with Christ is the grounds for sympathy. Just as the soul's sympathy for the body is grounded in their union, so too Christ's sympathy for his people is grounded in their union with him.¹⁴⁴ Flavel writes, "Surely this trouble of yours is a good argument of your integrity; union is

¹⁴³ See Chapter One regarding the pre-modern use of sympathy. Flavel mentions sympathy in other contexts as well, including between a parent and child. For example, in his *Sacramental Meditations*, he exposit Mark 9:24, noting that a father with tender love for his child came to Jesus because of his possessed child. Flavel writes of the father, "If the child be sick, the parent is not well; what touches the child, is felt by his father." Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:426.

¹⁴⁴ Here, Flavel asserts that the natural union between the body and the soul grounds the sympathy between them. Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:594.

the ground of sympathy; if you had not some rich adventure in that ship, you would not tremble as you do, when it is in danger.”¹⁴⁵ Christ’s sympathy is the fruit of the mutual interest that exists between him and his people as members of the same body. The tender sympathy of Christ flows out of the intimacy of this union.¹⁴⁶ This gives believers the confidence that Christ sympathizes with them in all their burdens.

Second, sympathy is evidence of the union that exists between Christ and believers. Though Flavel asserts that the union between Christ and his members is not a mere moral union, it is a “near and intimate union” that includes affection and love.¹⁴⁷ Sympathy therefore serves as evidence that there is indeed a union between Christ and believers. “The sympathy that is betwixt Christ and believers, proves a union betwixt them.”¹⁴⁸ It does not function as infallible proof of one’s union with Christ. Though it may serve as a comfort to believers in their working out the assurance of their salvation, they ought not to rest their certainty on these inward experiences.

Incarnation and priesthood. Flavel makes reference to Hebrews 4:15 throughout his works: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” He often appeals to this verse to emphasize Christ’s experimental knowledge in his humanity. Christ took on flesh, so that he could offer himself as a sacrifice as well as gain an experimental understanding of human nature whereby he

¹⁴⁵ John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed, or The Great Work of a Christian Explained and Applied*, in *Works*, 5:450.

¹⁴⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:46. See also 2:116.

¹⁴⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:38. Johnson captures this distinction clearly: “To be united to Christ is sometimes taken to mean no more than a bond of love that is established by Christ and reciprocated by those he saves. . . . There is some truth to be found here—we are indeed united to Christ in sympathetic love and purpose—but these conceptions fail to capture the vital, personal nature of the union.” Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 55.

¹⁴⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:36.

might effectively intercede for the saints. In *The Fountain of Life*, he typically and understandably appeals to Hebrews 4:15 not only to depict Christ's experience of full humanity, but also to prove his perfect nature that escaped defilement and corruption. The saints are eternally and intimately united to a tender and compassionate high priest, who is sympathetically affected with all their troubles as he understands all their miseries.

Flavel relates the sympathy of Christ's priesthood to his incarnation and union with Christ.¹⁴⁹ The incarnation serves as a necessary condition for sympathy, for it is the means by which Christ gains a full sense of human experience. He obtained "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."¹⁵⁰ But it was necessary that Christ escape the defilement of sin that he might be merciful. It is his priesthood that functions as the specified role in which he exercises his sympathy towards the saints. In other words, he not only extends compassion by his sacrifice, but intercedes sympathetically having a full experimental understanding of man's misery. Union with Christ, then, serves as the chief operative context for the sympathy of Christ. As believers are united to him, Christ is necessarily affected with their burdens and afflictions.¹⁵¹ "In all your afflictions he is afflicted; tender sympathy cannot but flow from such intimate

¹⁴⁹ In his commentary on Hebrews 4:15, Owen writes, "And these things are here ascribed unto our high priest on the account of his union with us, both in the participation of our nature and the communication of a new nature unto us, whereby we become "members of his body," one with him. He is deeply concerned in all our infirmities, sorrows, and sufferings." John Owen, *Hebrews: Exposition of Hebrews Chapters 3:7–5:14*, Vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992) 440.

¹⁵⁰ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:244.

¹⁵¹ Flavel is hardly alone in appealing to union with Christ as the primary context for sympathy. For example, Richard Sibbes uses the word "imputation" to describe the sympathetic suffering of Christ: "Especially, they are the sufferings of Christ by way of sympathy; because Christ doth impute them to himself. 'The sufferings of Christ.' It is a phrase that springs from the near union that is between Christ and his members, the church; which is near or nearer than any natural union between the head and members. . . . and he suffers in all his children. Not that he doth so in his own person, but because it pleaseth him, by reason of the near communion that is between him and us, to take that which is done to his members, as done to himself. Therefore they are called 'the sufferings of Christ.' He suffers when we suffer, and we suffer when he suffers." Richard Sibbes, *Exposition of 2 Corinthians Chapter 1*, *The Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 82.

union.”¹⁵² As it goes with the members of the body, so it goes with the head of the body. He is tenderly and sensibly touched with all their afflictions and straits.

The Sympathy of Christ

Flavel regards Christ’s sympathy as a privilege that has been secured for believers. He notes that all believers have an interest in the privileges that flow from union with Christ, including his sympathy with them in all their afflictions.¹⁵³ He acknowledges that union brings believers into an estate of special favor and acceptance. He declares that it “makes us the special objects of Christ’s conjugal love and delight. Draws from his heart sympathy and a tender sense of all our miseries and burdens.”¹⁵⁴ He acknowledges that Christ will not be cruel to his own flesh. Given that sympathy is a unique privilege for the saints, how does sympathy benefit believers?

Privileges. First, Flavel describes sympathy as Christ’s sharing (or partaking) of believers’ burdens. Speaking of Christ’s loveliness, Flavel remarks that no friend sympathizes with us as tenderly as Christ does. He feels all our burdens as his own.¹⁵⁵ He often uses the phrase “half’s mine” to depict the reality of Christ’s partaking of the saint’s troubles. “As we shall carry the cross of Christ but a little way, so Christ himself bears the heaviest end of it. And as one happily expresses, he saith of their crosses, *half mine*. He divideth sufferings with them, and takes the largest share to himself.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, Christ appropriates the interests of his people. To be clear, it is not that Christ sympathizes with us because he has experienced pain, grief and misery. Rather, he feels

¹⁵² Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:46.

¹⁵³ Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:427.

¹⁵⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:116.

¹⁵⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:222.

¹⁵⁶ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:330. See also 1:245.

the pains, miseries, and grief in his mystical body as though they were his.¹⁵⁷ All the wants and troubles of his people become his wants and troubles. In all their straits, troubles, burdens, afflictions or persecutions, Christ shares in the pains of his people because they are members of his body.

Second, Christ intercedes for his people as their high priest with an experimental (or sensible) knowledge of their miseries and infirmities. Speaking of Christ's high priestly prayer in John 17, Flavel writes, "For this being his last prayer on earth, it shews us what affections and dispositions he carried hence with him, and satisfies us, that he who was so earnest with God on our behalf, such a mighty pleader here, will not forget us, or neglect our concerns in the other world."¹⁵⁸ For Flavel, this prayer is a monument to believers that they might know his intercession in heaven. It is not simply that Christ tenderly prays for the saints, but he tenderly prays for them at such an intense time of sorrow and suffering.

Third, sympathy denotes the participation and presence of Christ with his people.¹⁵⁹ In other words, whatever is done to them is done to him. "Faith entitles Christ to the believer's sufferings, and puts them upon his score."¹⁶⁰ Flavel acknowledges that the wronging and persecuting of the saints is the wronging and persecuting of Christ

¹⁵⁷ Wilbourne captures the modern sentiment of sympathy—Christ sympathizes because he has experienced suffering. "When tragedy strikes, the most welcome comforters can be those who have experienced similar loss and pain. While all suffering is unique, because each person is, you want to be around someone who can sympathize and speak the language of your pain." Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2018), 254.

¹⁵⁸ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:253.

¹⁵⁹ Campbell has helpfully described the components of union with Christ in four terms: union (nuptial notions), participation (partaking), identification (location and allegiance), and incorporation (belonging to a corporate body). These elements are certainly visible in Flavel's description of Christ's sympathy for the saints, incorporation emerging most clearly in his discussions of the moral union or Christ mystical. Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 413.

¹⁶⁰ Flavel, *Preparations for Suffering*, in *Works*, 6:44.

himself. Likewise, the refreshment of the saints is the refreshment of Christ.¹⁶¹ Flavel often appeals to Acts 9:4-5 to illustrate this reality: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He also frequently references Matthew 25:35: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Flavel explains, “For look, as Christ, the head of that body is touched with a tender sense and feeling of the miseries and troubles of his people, he is persecuted when they are persecuted.”¹⁶² In Flavel’s estimation, those who persecute the church strike at the very apple of Christ’s eye by virtue of the reality that he identifies sympathetically with his people.

Last, though Christ’s sympathy is a privilege reserved for the saints alone, there is no discrimination of this benefit among believers themselves. All members share equally in the privilege, each receiving Christ’s sympathy irrespective of their gifts, sins, time of conversion, or strength of faith. Considering privileges such as the sympathy of Christ, Flavel writes concerning degrees of faith, “All saving faith receives Christ. Indeed, the strong believer receives him with a stronger and steadier hand than the weak one doth, who staggers, doubts, and trembles, but yet receives him; and consequently, is as much interested in the blessed privileges flowing from the union as the greatest believer in the world.”¹⁶³ Acknowledging the insufficiency of the analogy of the head and body, Flavel holds that all members alike lie equally near and dear to Christ, all being united to him by faith.

Distance, suffering, and impassibility. If Christ is in heaven, distant from his people, how can he display his affectionate compassion toward them? Flavel explains,

¹⁶¹ Flavel, *Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:192.

¹⁶² Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:337.

¹⁶³ Flavel, *Sacramental Meditations*, in *Works*, 6:427.

“He makes our cause his own, and acts for us in heaven, as for himself. He is touched with the tender sense of our troubles and dangers, and is not only one with us, by way of representation, but also one with us in respect of sympathy and affection.”¹⁶⁴ This raises several theological issues: (1) the sufficiency of Christ’s sufferings on earth; (2) the reality of Christ’s suffering in heaven; and (3) the impassibility of God.

With respect to the first, Flavel makes a distinction between Christ’s suffering in his person (*corpore proprio*) and in his body (*corpore mystico*). Flavel argues that Christ’s suffering in his person should not be regarded as imperfect (or incomplete). He writes,

He suffered once in *corpore proprio*, in his own person, as Mediator; these sufferings are complete and full, and in that sense he suffers no more: he suffers also in *corpore mystico*, in his church and members, thus he still suffers in the sufferings of every saint for his sake; and though these sufferings in his mystical body are not equal to the other, either *pondere et mensura*, in their weight and value, nor yet designed *ex officio*, for the same use and purpose, to satisfy by their proper merit, offended justice; nevertheless they are truly reckoned the sufferings of Christ, because the head suffers when the members do.¹⁶⁵

Christ’s suffering in his person is complete, thereby securing the satisfaction necessary for the salvation of sinners. But Flavel acknowledges that Christ does still suffer in his body, in the afflictions of the saints. He appeals to Paul’s remarks in Colossians 1:24, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” Hence, the sufferings of the saints are accounted as the sufferings of Christ.

But how does the ascended Christ in heaven now suffer with the saints? Flavel affirms that there is no actual suffering in heaven. “It is true, Christ and his cross are not separable in this life; howbeit Christ and his cross part at heaven’s door: for there is no house-room for crosses in heaven. One tear, one sigh, one sad heart, one fear, one loss,

¹⁶⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:221.

¹⁶⁵ Flavel, *Mount Pisgah*, in *Works*, 2:36–37.

one thought of trouble cannot find lodging there.”¹⁶⁶ Christ does not suffer in heaven in his person, but in the members of his body. Richard Sibbes agrees, “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. . . . Christ suffers nothing; he is in heaven, in glory. How can he suffer? This is to disparage his glorious estate, to make him suffer anything.”¹⁶⁷ He proceeds, like Flavel, to differentiate between the propitiatory and satisfying suffering of Christ in his person and the suffering of Christ in his mystical body. Essentially, because of the union between Christ and believers, the mystical body is called Christ himself.

While Flavel does not explicitly use the nomenclature of God’s “impassibility,” he does emphasize God’s immutability in his *Exposition of the Assembly’s Catechism* and *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*. He argues for God’s immutability based on his perfection, the purity (“uncompoundedness”) of his being, and the necessity of his glory.¹⁶⁸ Consequently, Flavel stands within a classic conceptualization of God, affirming the perfection of his being and attributes including his eternity, immutability, simplicity, and aseity.¹⁶⁹ In this way, God remains unaffected

¹⁶⁶ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:330.

¹⁶⁷ Richard Sibbes, *Exposition of 2 Corinthians 1*, in *The Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 82.

¹⁶⁸ John Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:375–76.

¹⁶⁹ Here, classical Christian theism should be understood as having “a strong commitment to the doctrines of divine aseity, immutability, impassibility, simplicity, eternity, and the substantial unity of the divine persons. The underlying and inviolable conviction is that God does not derive any aspect of His being from outside Himself and is not in any way caused to be.” James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 1. On the other hand, Dolezal and Carter refer to another, newer approach in understanding God which they label as “theistic mutualism,” “theistic personalism,” or “relational theism.” Carter suggests that having a lower tolerance for mystery and paradox in Christian theology as well as a lost connection to classic Nicene orthodoxy, these conceptualizations of God “apply to a number of different doctrines of God, all of which affirm that God changes the world and the world changes God.” Craig A. Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 16–28. Likewise, Weinandy confronts the growing acceptance of a God who is like man, capable of suffering and standing in solidarity with man. Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000). Lister and Ware, on the other hand, argue that there is a predominant commitment in mainstream reformation theology to a dual affirmation of impassibility and divine passion. Rob Lister and Bruce Ware, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 112. Dolezal asserts that “theistic mutualism”—a mutual affectedness between created persons and the divine being—runs contrary to classic orthodoxy of divine impassibility

by the creation, and he is not subject to any mutual affectedness on the part of man. He appeals to these attributes of God, in his pastoral care, to provide comfort and strength amid the afflictions of life. While affirming immutability, Flavel teaches that Christ is sympathetically and sensibly touched in heaven by the suffering of the saints.¹⁷⁰ In these instances, he does not allude to the affectedness of the divine nature, but he appeals singularly to the incarnate Son of God in his mediatorial role. The theme of Christ's sympathy with the church in heaven allows Flavel to consistently and pastorally invite a suffering church to take encouragement in the fact that Christ knows their pains as his own pains and troubles.

Conclusion

The doctrine of union with Christ occupies a prominent place in Flavel's theology and ministry. Consistent with Westminster covenant theology, he acknowledges that the greatest need for those who are "in Adam" is to be implanted in, or espoused to, Christ, whereby they become the beneficiaries of his person and privileges. Like Calvin before him, Flavel acknowledges that there is no salvation apart from redemption applied by means of union with Christ.

This union is a vital, intimate, and eternal conjunction between Christ and

and simplicity, risks crafting a god after the image of man, and is pervasive among notable reformed scholarship, citing scholars including Ronald Nash, D. A. Carson, and J. I. Packer. On the affectedness of God, see Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 99. On the vulnerability of God who feels pain, see D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 59. On the moving of God in his unfolding experiences, see J. I. Packer, "Theism for Our Time," in *God Who Is Rich in Mercy*, ed. Peter T. O'Brien and David G. Peterson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 17. For varying views of divine impassibility, see Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill, eds., *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God's Emotions and Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

¹⁷⁰ Goodwin specifically addresses this issue in *The Heart of Christ* arguing that the afflictions of his mystical body do not afflict or perturb him the least. "And the reason of this is, because his body, and the blood and spirits thereof, the instruments of affecting him, are now altogether impassible, namely, in this sense, that they are not capable of the least alteration tending to any hurt whatever." Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Edinburgh, U.K.; Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 2011), 143. Sibbes, on the other hand, notes that Christ's advancement in heaven does not make him forget his saints. He writes, "Though it has freed him from passion, yet not from compassion towards us." Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 9.

believers, whereby he takes hold of his people by the Holy Spirit and they take hold of him by faith. This union serves as the sole channel by which God's precious mercies flow to his people. They receive pardoning mercy, preventing mercy, and supplying mercy. Most of all, they receive Christ—the mercy of mercies. From his person flow the innumerable privileges enjoyed by his people. Appealing to 1 Corinthians 1:30, Flavel identifies the chief privileges as wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. The communication of these benefits to believers comes by way of communion with Christ. In addition to these, believers receive daily mercies through God's providential care whereby he preserves them, provides for them, and transforms them into greater end conformity with Christ.

For Flavel, Christ's sympathy is a wonderful privilege. Because of his union with his people, Christ identifies with them in their suffering. As the body and soul are mutually affected by what happens to each other, so Christ is affected by what happens to his mystical body. What touches the members of his body touches him. Accordingly, Flavel encourages suffering saints with a high priest who sympathizes with them in their weaknesses.

CHAPTER 4
CHRIST MYSTICAL: COMPASSION IN THE SERVICE
OF GOD

By virtue of union with Christ, believers become members of the mystical body of Christ (or “Christ mystical”).¹ Quoting Ephesians 5:30, Flavel states that those who are united to Christ are “members of his body.” They receive the greatest honor ever bestowed upon any individual, and they stand in special favor with God: “So that as Adam’s posterity stood upon the same terms that he their natural head did, so believers, Christ’s mystical members, stand in the favour of God, by the favour which Christ their spiritual head hath.”² Flavel argues that the mystical body of Christ is not a continuation of the incarnation by differentiating between “Christ personal” and “Christ mystical.”³ While the person of Christ “is at the fountain-head of all the riches in glory,” the body of Christ “is exposed to necessities and wants, he feels hunger and thirst, cold and pains, in his body the church.”⁴ While Christ’s personal sufferings are complete, having fulfilled the wrath of God, his sufferings in his mystical body have not fully satisfied the wrath of

¹ While the term “Christ mystical” has fallen into disuse in modern theology, Flavel and his contemporaries use it to describe what Paul labels as the body of Christ. There are many scholars who reject the term. Smedes goes so far to advocate that the term be jettisoned altogether. “We may be better off if we forget such a word as “mystical.” We may make things clearer if we stop talking about the ‘mystical body of Christ.’ Paul never calls the church a “mystical” body. Why should we? It only tempts us to look somewhere behind the actual church to some phantom church, invisible and unhistorical. Lewis B Smedes, “Christ and His Body,” *Reformed Journal* 16, no. 3 (March 1966): 18.

² John Flavel, *The Method of Grace in Gospel Redemption*, in *Works*, 2:265.

³ Clowney agrees, clarifying with precision: “This closeness of identification does not mean that Paul is caught in a naïve or mystical realism in which he cannot distinguish between the physical body of Christ and the figure of the body applied to the church. Even less does Paul think that Christ died in the body of his flesh, to be raised in the body of the church.” Edmund Clowney, “The Biblical Theology of the Church,” in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 52.

⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:43.

men.⁵ Though Christ now resides in glory, “his mystical body is not full till all the elect be gathered in by conversion, and gathered home by glorification.”⁶ The members of Christ mystical (the church) consist of all the company of the elect, each member standing equally near and dear to the head.

Not only are believers united to Christ, the head, they are united to one another as members of the one body.⁷ The first is a mystical union, whereas the second is a moral union. Flavel writes,

There is a twofold union, one mystical, betwixt Christ and believers; another moral, betwixt believers themselves: faith knits them all to Christ, and then love knits them one to another. Their common relation to Christ their head endears them to each other as fellow-members in the same body: hence they become *sanguine Christi conglutinate*, glued together by the blood of Christ. Union with Christ is fundamental to all union among the saints.⁸

While Flavel does not treat the doctrine of Christ mystical in a comprehensive fashion, as he does the person of Christ in *The Fountain of Life* and union with Christ in *The Method of Grace*, it does appear throughout his works. It is the central premise in his treatise *Gospel Unity*.

The moral union between believers is an affectionate bond of love. While believers have civil, familial, organizational, and political unity with unbelievers, it is only “in Christ” that they have gospel or spiritual unity. Such unity comes by way of “joint membership in Christ.” Flavel does speak of a moral unity among people by love: parents and children, husbands and wives. Yet, this is not the same as that which exists

⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:36–37. See also John Flavel, *Preparation for Suffering, or The Best Work in the Worst Times*, in *Works*, 6:9.

⁶ John Flavel, *Pneumatologia: A Treatise of the Soul of Man*, in *Works*, 3:8.

⁷ Though addressing issues related to congregationalism, Allison places an emphasis on the order of these unions, agreeing that the covenant God establishes first with his people is foundational for any unity among the members. Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 128.

⁸ John Flavel, *Gospel Unity Recommended to the Churches of Christ*, in *Works*, 3:594.

between believers.⁹ “Sincere Christianity holds fast the soul by a firm bond of life to the truly Christian community, wherein they reap those spiritual pleasures and advantages, which assure their continuance therein to a great degree.”¹⁰ Flavel sees this moral union in John 17:23, where Christ declares, “I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one.” Christ’s essential union with the Father and mystical union with believers results in a “third union betwixt believers themselves. . . . the same Spirit dwelling in them all, and equally uniting them all to me, as living members to their Head of influence, there must needs be a dear and intimate union betwixt themselves, as fellow-members of the same body.”¹¹

While Christ cares for the members of his mystical body, they too care for one another.¹² They do so as those who have experienced spiritual consolations from Christ. Because they know Christ’s compassion, they are to be compassionate toward others, especially those in the household of faith. “Religion breeds bowels of compassion,” says Flavel.¹³ Incorporation into Christ’s mystical body directs the believer’s practice of compassion.¹⁴ The union that believers have with Christ and with one another serves as a governing principle that shapes their imitation of Christ’s compassion. There are several

⁹ Crampton provides a succinct summary of the basic teachings of the church according to the Westminster Confession. W. Gary Crampton, *What the Puritans Taught: An Introduction to Puritan Theology* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2003), 73–89.

¹⁰ Flavel, *Gospel Unity*, in *Works*, 3:595.

¹¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:34.

¹² Flavel describes Christ’s posture towards his body, the church: “Every one naturally cares and provides for his own, especially for his own body; yet we can more easily violate the law of nature, and be cruel to our own flesh, than Christ can be so to his mystical body.” Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:45.

¹³ John Flavel, *England’s Duty Under the Present Gospel Liberty*, in *Works*, 4:234.

¹⁴ Macaskill argues that Christian morality must account for more than mere imitation of Christ. Instead, he states that moral theology must include “participation in terms of dynamic *koinonia* with God . . . to accommodate the New Testament teaching.” Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 307. As Anthony Hoekema notes, “When we are in Christ, Christ is also in us. Our living in him and his living in us are as inseparable as finger and thumb.” Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 55.

reasons for this. First, Christ mystical shares a congruent nature with her governing head, whose compassionate nature she imitates. Second, Christ mystical proportions her compassion according to the reality of membership in Christ's body. Third, Christ mystical prioritizes compassion towards those who are perishing in a condition of sin and misery. Fourth, Christ mystical weds spiritual commitments to all her material and temporal relief.

The Head and the Body

Flavel directs believers to imitate Christ. One of the primary ends of Christ assuming human nature was to set a pattern before the church.¹⁵ Therefore, “the conformity of your lives to Christ, your pattern, is your highest excellency in this world. . . . The excellency of every creature rises higher and higher, according as it approaches still nearer and nearer to its original.”¹⁶ Flavel urges believers to conform themselves to Christ in their holiness, patience, meekness, forgiveness, and all Christian duties.¹⁷ He implores them as members of Christ's body to pattern their lives after the compassionate nature of Christ. “Was Christ yet more humbled, by his own sympathy with others in their distresses? Hence we learn, that a compassionate spirit, towards such as labour under burdens of sin, or affliction, is Christ-like, and truly excellent: this was the Spirit of Christ: O be like him! Put on as the elect of God, bowels of mercy.”¹⁸ Given

¹⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:415.

¹⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:418.

¹⁷ Beyond mere imitation, Vanhoozer further draws out the substance of union with Christ and believers' enacting the activity of God through the concept of theo-drama. “Being-in-Christ gets acted out in ten thousand places, and is thus inherently dramatic. Those who are in Christ act out Christ's obedient sonship, attesting to his death and resurrection in every scene they play. Call it theodramatic participation: participation in Trinitarian communicative activity oriented toward communion ‘in Christ.’” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., “From ‘Blessed in Christ’ to ‘Being in Christ’: The State of Union and the Place of Participation in Paul's Discourse, New Testament Exegesis, and Systematic Theology Today,” in *“In Christ” in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 28–30.

¹⁸ John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life: A Display of Christ in his Essential and Mediatorial Glory*, in *Works*, 1:244.

the disparity between the sinfulness of man and the holiness of Christ, how might believers put on bowels of mercy and imitate God's compassionate nature?

A Congruent Nature

While Flavel asserts that those outside of Christ are alive to all things natural, they are spiritually dead.¹⁹ “Theologically considered, they are dead; without life, sense, or motion, towards God . . . their understandings are dead, and cannot receive the things that are of God; their wills are dead, and cannot move towards Jesus Christ. Their affections are dead, even to the most excellent and spiritual objects.”²⁰ Hence, Flavel insists on the necessity of regeneration. Regeneration is the infusion of new life into the believer who is implanted into Christ by the Holy Spirit: “This life of God, with which the regenerate are quickened in their union with Christ,” is a divine, excellent, pleasant, increasing and everlasting life by the work of the Spirit.²¹ Regeneration transforms the inner man—including the understanding, will, and affections—which in turn renews the actions of the outward man.²² The new creature (or the new man) receives a spiritual life that loves what God loves and “opposeth sin because there is an irreconcilable antipathy betwixt it and the new nature in him.”²³ By regeneration, the disordered heart is set right, living under a new law that leads the soul to faithful obedience and communion with God.²⁴

¹⁹ For instance, Flavel describes the unregenerate having the ability to reason, communicate, eat, drink, work and manage all their worldly affairs. Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:99.

²⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:99.

²¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:91.

²² Speaking of coming to Christ, Bunyan concurs in the change of inward affections toward God: “The church expresses this moving of her mind towards Christ by the moving of her bowels. . . . ‘My bowels’ indicates the passions of my mind and affections.” John Bunyan, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 25.

²³ John Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity, or The Signs of Grace and Symptoms of Hypocrisy*, in *Works*, 5:563.

²⁴ Charles Cohen describes the change from the vantage point of conversion psychology. The love believers know through their conversion “inspires a reciprocal ardor towards Him and a renewed

The work that is first begun in regeneration requires conformity to Christ. In other words, Christ mystical must be of the same nature as the head. “The nature of Christ-mystical requires this conformity, and renders it indispensably necessary. Otherwise, the body of Christ must be heterogeneous; of a nature different from the head, and how monstrous and uncomely would his be?”²⁵ Referencing 1 Corinthians 15:48–49, Flavel holds that Paul “describes the members of Christ (as they ought to be) of the same nature and quality with the head.”²⁶ The transformation of the believer means his objects of sinful delight become burdens of shame. They also become “objects of pity and compassion.” Flavel argues that Christ mystical represents Christ to the world. His pastoral concern is that the body of Christ does not present a contradictory image. Because Christ, the head, is holy, his body ought to be holy. Christ mystical, conformed to the head, ought also to express his compassion.

According to Flavel, this does not mean that the regenerate are fully conformed to the image of Christ this side of heaven. Rather, the believer enters a process of sanctification.²⁷ “Sanctification notes an holy dedication of heart and life to God: Our becoming the temples of the living God, separate from all profane sinful practices, to the Lord’s only use and service.”²⁸ This process is gradual, whereby the believer “concur[s]” with the Spirit, growing from infancy to maturity in the faith.²⁹ Because this process may

affection for other worldlings lies at the heart of conversion psychology.” Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God’s Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 160.

²⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:414.

²⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:414. 1 Corinthians 15:48-49 states, “As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.”

²⁷ Flavel divides sanctification into “initial” and “progressive” sanctification. See Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:192. In view here, and most discussed by Flavel, is progressive sanctification.

²⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:19.

²⁹ Bonar suggests that because of this, believers have the opportunity to render to the Lord things that cannot be rendered in heaven. In other words, because of believers’ striving towards holiness in their un-perfected state, they may glorify God in ways that the angels and perfected saints cannot. Horatius

be easily confused with insincere and external conformity to God's law, Flavel is careful to demarcate true sanctification by its work upon the desires of the heart. "True sanctification purgeth the heart from the love of sin."³⁰ He maintains that the work of sanctification not only conforms believers to the written Word but produces "secret springs" and "holy aims" in the performance of all outward duties.

Importantly, Flavel provides several evidences of the Spirit's sanctifying work in the heart of the believer. One evidence is that "Those to whom God giveth his Spirit have a tender sympathy with all the interests and concernments of Christ."³¹ Flavel reasons that the various members of a natural body are animated by one and the same spirit with the head. While Christ the head certainly sympathizes with his members, the members ought likewise to sympathize with the head. "For look, as Christ, the head of that body is touched with a tender sense and feeling of the miseries and troubles of his people. . . . so they that have the Spirit of Christ in them, cannot be without a deep and tender sense of the reproach and dishonours that are done to Christ."³² Both the head and the members share the same Spirit and are united in one body, thus it follows that sympathy is an evidence of God's sanctifying work in the believer. This sympathy includes a deep concern for the advancement of Christ's interests, which eclipses any concern for one's personal affairs.

A New Government

Those who are united to Christ are one with him, the head, by way of influence and honor. They are also one with him by way of government. "The members are subject

Bonar, *Christ Our High Priest: Bearing the Iniquity of Our Holy Things* (Pensacola, FL: Chapel Library, 2007), 27.

³⁰ John Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:200.

³¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:337.

³² Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:337.

to the head. Dominion in the head must needs infer subjection in the members. In vain do we claim union with Christ as our head, whilst we are governed by our own wills, and our lusts give us law.”³³ As the body’s governing head (or king), Christ guides and quickens the members of his body. Flavel states, “O then let all that under Christ’s government walk as the subjects of such a King. Imitate your King; the examples of kings are very influential upon their subjects.”³⁴ The subjects of Christ imitate his service, suffering, and diligence in all his work. Even as they are called to imitate and follow their governmental head, they are called to strive towards obedience to God’s revealed will (or moral law). According to Flavel (and the Westminster divines), this moral law is comprehended in the Ten Commandments and summarized in the greatest commandment to love God above all else and neighbor as oneself.

It is notable that Flavel includes the Christian duty of compassion in the moral law. He provides three examples of compassion to which believers ought to submit themselves thereby imitating their head. First, Flavel argues that all superiors and inferiors are concerned in the fifth commandment.³⁵ He writes that it is the duty of parents “to be tenderly, but not fondly affectionate to and tender of” their children.³⁶ Second, Flavel believes that the eighth commandment, “Thou shalt not steal,” forbids the unjust acquisition of another’s wealth and also necessitates the compassionate care for one’s neighbor. “It requires us not only to get and keep the things of the world in a lawful manner, but to distribute and communicate them to those that are in want.”³⁷ Flavel

³³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:48.

³⁴ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:210.

³⁵ The fifth command is to “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12).

³⁶ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:239. Here, Flavel quotes Isaiah 49:15, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?”

³⁷ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:246.

appeals to 1 John 3:17 as proof: “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”³⁸ Third, Flavel teaches that the tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not covet,” requires “a charitable frame of spirit towards our neighbours.”³⁹ In this way, the moral law places duties on the members of the body to submit to their governing head by demonstrating compassionate care for their neighbors.

A Suitable Response

In his preaching, Flavel does not merely expound the necessity of the work and application of redemption in Christ, but consistently calls believers to holy living in obedience to their head. “He hath yet more obliged you to strict and holy lives, by his confidence in you, that you will thus walk and please him.”⁴⁰ For Flavel, these works are not meritorious, but constitute the believer’s response to God’s mercies.⁴¹ Flavel references Isaiah 63:7 for support: “I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us.” It is for this reason that Flavel often describes the obedient responses of believers as “returns” or “suitable returns.”⁴² He urges members of Christ’s body to walk uprightly according to the abundant mercies God has extended to them in Christ.

³⁸ Flavel uses the language of “shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him.”

³⁹ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:252. Romans 12:10 states, “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” Romans 12:15 states, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

⁴⁰ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:540.

⁴¹ Though Brauer’s nomenclature on the types of Puritans may be questionable (nomist, evangelical, rationalistic, and mystic), he does rightly identify some pastoral tendencies and theological trajectories. For example, he states that the “evangelical” Puritan focuses on God’s work and man’s response. “God’s action is the good news; humanity cannot and does not do a thing about it. It is purely an act of divine grace, of self-giving love. It creates in human beings a response of trust, faith, and communion with God and with one’s fellow human beings.” Jerald C Brauer, “Types of Puritan Piety,” *Church History* 56, no. 1 (March 1987): 47.

⁴² Flavel uses the language of “returns” in various places. For example, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:234. See also, *Divine Conduct, or The Mystery of Providence*, in *Works*, 4:404.

These suitable returns to the mercies of Christ include showing compassion to others. Flavel expresses this duty most clearly in *A Saint Indeed*: “None should be so filled with bowels of pity, forbearance, and mercy, to such as wrong them, as those should be that have experienced the riches of mercy themselves: methinks the mercy of God to us should melt our very bowels into mercy over others.”⁴³ Flavel goes on to suggest that it is impossible for someone who has experienced infinite mercy to be cruel to others. Appealing to the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18, Flavel asserts that the forgiven servant ought to “have been a fountain of compassion towards others.”⁴⁴ As the believer has experienced God’s patience and forbearance, so too he must return patience and forbearance. As the believer experiences the merciful providences of God, so too he must show compassion to those who have not experienced the same mercies.⁴⁵ The compassion of God towards sinners breeds compassion. Flavel insists that it is the only reasonable and suitable response for the members of Christ’s body.

The Debt of Sympathy

In addition to the church’s relationship with her governing head, the mystical body frames Flavel’s conceptualization of believers’ compassionate duty toward one another.⁴⁶ He expresses a deep commitment to communal life and mutual support,⁴⁷ and

⁴³ John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed, or The Great Work of a Christian Explained and Applied*, in *Works*, 5:473.

⁴⁴ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:83. “And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” (Matt. 18:33).

⁴⁵ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:404.

⁴⁶ Though Flavel acknowledges the importance of the body of Christ in areas of compassion such as sympathy between the members, he gives little attention to areas such as church discipline and the role of the members of the body compassionately and gently restoring those that have fallen away. Citing Jude 1:23, Cartwright provides an example of the necessity of this compassionate responsibility of the body of Christ. Thomas Cartwright, *A Sermon Preached before the King at White-Hall* (London, 1675), 5–7.

⁴⁷ Ryken argues that Puritanism placed a strong emphasis on communal life and caring for one another, against the notion that the Puritans were purely individualistic and cold. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 174–76.

goes so far as to call sympathy a “debt” to Christ mystical.⁴⁸ “Surely (my brethren) sympathy is a debt we owe to Christ mystical. Whatever our constitution, condition, or personal immunities be, yet when God calls for mourning, we must hear and obey that call.”⁴⁹ Drawing on the sympathetic relationship between the body and soul, Flavel stresses that the unity among believers in Christ necessitates compassionate care for one another.⁵⁰ He explains that the soul employs all its strength to help when the body is in distress. “This is a real and unexceptionable evidence of its dear and tender love to the body. As those that belong to one mystical body shew their sincere love this way.”⁵¹ Flavel elsewhere states that the union of the saints with the head and one another “will beget sympathy among them.”⁵² Fellow-membership in one body is the chief consideration in the practice of sympathy.⁵³ For Flavel, the union of Christ mystical necessitates sympathy among the members.

Given the numerous burdens experienced by God’s people, he exhorts believers to become affected with the misery (or suffering) of the other members of the body. They suffer “with” one another (burden-bearing) and “by virtue of” being united to

⁴⁸ Van Engen agrees, stating that sympathy was both a doctrine and a duty. Abram Van Engen, “Puritanism and the Power of Sympathy,” *Early American Literature* 45, no. 3 (November 2010): 534. Yet, Van Engen does not capture the theological doctrine of union found in the theology of Flavel and other seventeenth-century English Puritans. While sympathy may strengthen the bond, the essence of the bond does not consist in sympathy, but in union with Christ by the Spirit and faith.

⁴⁹ John Flavel, *Navigation Spiritualized: A New Compass for Seamen*, in *Works*, 5:276.

⁵⁰ Lawrence emphasizes the impact of regeneration on the corporate nature of the church. “The Spirit doesn’t simply make me a singular new creation. He makes me part of God’s new creation people. He inscribes God’s rule on my heart, teaching me about love for neighbor and love for my brothers and sisters in Christ especially.” Michael Lawrence, *Conversion: How God Creates a People* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 28.

⁵¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:592.

⁵² Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity*, in *Works*, 5:541.

⁵³ Jones agrees arguing that because Christ’s work has created one body and joined each Christian to that body, “mutual care by Christians flows from their identity as fellow members of the same body.” Robert David Jones, “A Biblical-Theological Study of the New Testament Church as God’s Designed Agent and Setting for the Ministry of Mutual Christian Care” (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 2015), 144.

one another.⁵⁴ Flavel counsels, “Get your hearts deeply affected with Zion’s misery, and strive earnestly with the Lord on its behalf.” In his mind, there should be an identifiable congruence between the suffering of one member of the body and the rest of the members. He acknowledges the reality of idiopathical burdens, “such as we bear upon our own proper account and score.” Yet, Christ mystical also suffers under sympathetical burdens, the burden-bearing the members have on account of others. He writes, “Every true member of the church of God ought to sympathize both with God. . . . and with the people of God.”⁵⁵ The members of the body should have the same concerns as that of God, grieving the things that dishonor him. They also mourn for all the burdens upon God’s people.

Flavel appeals to a number of Scripture texts for support.⁵⁶ From the Old Testament, he recalls Moses and Nehemiah. These men had the wealth and power of the nations before them, yet they forsook it for the interests of their brothers. “Nehemiah could not do so, though the servant and favourite of a mighty monarch, and wanted nothing to make him outwardly happy; yet the pleasures of a king’s court could not cheer his heart, or scatter the clouds of sorrow from his countenance, whilst his brethren were in affliction, and the city of his God lay waste.”⁵⁷ Flavel also appeals to Amos 6:1,7 to expose the hypocrisy of false pretenders of religion who stand unmoved at the troubles of

⁵⁴ Owen argues that to suffer with other members of the body is an act of union with them. He lists five things that it requires: (1) a union of the same mystical body, (2) the acting of the same common principle of spiritual life, (3) an affecting compassion including sorrow and trouble, (4) a joint interest in the same cause, and (5) a discharge of these duties towards the suffering. John Owen, *Hebrews: Exposition of Hebrews Chapters 11:1–13:25*, Vol. 7 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 396.

⁵⁵ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:17.

⁵⁶ Flavel appeals to the following texts. “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian” (Acts 7:23–24). “He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward” (Heb. 11:26). “Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” (Neh. 2:3). “And if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked” (2 Peter 2:7).

⁵⁷ Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity*, in *Works*, 5:541.

God's people: "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria. . . . who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" Likewise, Flavel appeals to the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel to explain God's delight in his people's affectedness.⁵⁸ They are to have a congruent state with their spiritual relations, mourning with their afflictions and rejoicing with their joys.

In the New Testament, Flavel frequently references the epistles (especially the Pauline letters) to prove that God calls us to practice sympathy among the members of the body. Paul writes, "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?" (2 Cor. 11:29). Flavel remarks, "And indeed, it is an argument of rich, as well as true grace, that we can, and do heartily mourn with, and for the interest and people of God, though our own lot in the world . . . be never so comfortable."⁵⁹ Joseph Hall also appeals to this verse, stating that "no Christian can be afflicted alone."⁶⁰ Additionally, Flavel appeals to 1 Corinthians 12:26, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."⁶¹ Similarly, he references Romans 12:15: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."⁶² As the

⁵⁸ Isaiah 22:12 states, "In that day the Lord God of hosts called for weeping and mourning, for baldness and wearing sackcloth." Ezekiel 9:4 states, "Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it."

⁵⁹ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:17.

⁶⁰ Hall reinforces the inherent nature of sympathy within the body due to its unity. "We cannot be single in our affections, if we be limbs of a Christian community; What member of the body can complain, so as the rest shall not feel it?" Joseph Hall, *Christ Mystical, or The Blessed Union of Christ and His Members* (London, 1647), 134–35.

⁶¹ Morris emphasizes that the language employed by Paul recognizes the impossibility of rivalry within the body. Instead, there is unity within suffering and honor. Leon L. Morris, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 171.

⁶² Though Witherington's conclusion misses the mark of Paul's sympathetic suffering with the church (that is, Paul's absorption in his work), he captures the idea identified by Flavel. "Whenever anyone was weak, Paul felt it; whenever anyone was scandalized or deliberately caused to stumble, Paul was burned up." Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 453.

head sympathizes (or is touched) by the miseries of the members, “so they that have the Spirit of Christ in them, cannot be without a deep and tender sense of the reproach and dishonours that are done to Christ.”⁶³ Appealing to Philippians 2:1-2, Flavel acknowledges that sympathy between the members becomes an integral component (or ingredient) to Christian unity.⁶⁴ In sum, sympathy and compassion among believers is a necessary consequence by virtue of joint membership in one body.

By exhorting the members of Christ mystical to sympathize with one other, Flavel indicates that they should show preferment to fellow believers. “Their love to the church, of which they are members, makes this greatly desirable. Moses was a man who excelled in love to the church, witness that transcendent rapture of his . . . but though he be scarcely imitable therein, yet every real Christian doth, in his right frame, prefer Jerusalem to his chief joy.”⁶⁵ Elsewhere, he writes, “Are all men to be loved alike, and with the same degree of love? No; though we must love with the love of benevolence, yet the saints only with the love of complacency.”⁶⁶ From Galatians 6:10, Flavel makes it clear that “as we have opportunity” we are to do good to everyone. Yet, he also insists, as does Paul, that we are to show good “especially to those who are of the household of faith.” The psalmist declares, “As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones in whom is all my delight” (Ps. 16:3). While believers ought to show good to all people, they delight especially in showing good to their spiritual relations.

In *Antipharicum Saluberrimum*, Flavel posits three reasons why believers

⁶³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:337.

⁶⁴ “So if there is any encouragement is Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

⁶⁵ John Flavel, *Mount Pisgah: A Sermon Preached at the Public Thanksgiving, Feb. 14th, 1688–89, for England’s Deliverance from Popery*, in *Works*, 4:329.

⁶⁶ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:222. Flavel uses a now antiquated definition of “complacency.” Rather than “self-satisfaction” or “self-approval,” Flavel uses it in terms of “delight,” “enjoyment,” or “pleasure.”

should pursue love and tenderness among the members of Christ mystical. First, mutual love is evidence of regeneration. Referencing 1 John 3:14, Flavel writes, “That Scripture makes your love to the brethren a positive mark of your regeneration.”⁶⁷ Elsewhere, he declares that those who have the Spirit of God have a sympathy with all the interests of Christ and his people.⁶⁸ Second, mutual love was one of Christ’s final commands to the church. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Third, mutual love supports the church from danger and ruin. Flavel calls the church to lay down differences and animosities, and instead “strive day and night with God by importunate prayers for the prevention of those imminent judgments.”⁶⁹ He calls the church to put on bowels of compassion (Col. 3:12), so that it may stand united against the attacks of the world and the devil.⁷⁰

Flavel does qualify the first reason above. The sympathy that believers have for one another should not be regarded as an “infallible mark of grace.” He writes, “Melting affections and sorrows, even from the sense and consideration of Christ’s sufferings, are no infallible marks of grace.”⁷¹ In other words, the heart may remain unregenerate despite having certain emotions towards Christ and the saints. While Flavel’s exhortations are spoken specifically in reference to grief and anguish over sin, he acknowledges the possibility of an emotional stirring without any change in the inclination of the heart toward God.⁷² Instead, Flavel calls men to carefully examine the foundation of their

⁶⁷ John Flavel, *Antipharmacum Saluberrimum, or A Serious and Seasonable Caveat to all the Saints in this Hour of Temptation*, in *Works*, 4:582. 1 John 3:14 states, “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.”

⁶⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:337.

⁶⁹ Flavel, *Antipharmacum Saluberrimum*, in *Works*, 4:583.

⁷⁰ “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

⁷¹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:310.

⁷² For more background on Flavel’s teaching regarding the marks of a true Christian, Macleod has summarized Flavel’s teaching on the distinguishing marks between true and nominal Christians from

salvation. “O therefore search thy heart, reader be not too confident: take not up too easily upon such poor weak grounds as these . . . Always remember the wheat and tares resemble each other in their first springing up.”⁷³ In this way, Flavel provides a warning to confessing Christians regarding the grounds of their faith.⁷⁴ Movements of the soul might be natural and, therefore, deceive the soul into mistaking them for a renewed heart.

Flavel offers another reason why sympathy among the members of Christ’s body is important. Because the saints belong to Christ mystical, their joys become Christ’s joys. The consolations of the saints become the consolations of Christ.⁷⁵ Essentially, what is done for the saints is done for Christ.⁷⁶ “Christ mystical is exposed to necessities and wants, he feels hunger and thirst, cold and pains, in his body the church; and he is refreshed, relieved, and comforted, in their refreshments and comforts.”⁷⁷ While “Christ personal” resides in heaven, “Christ mystical” has many wants and needs. Speaking of the saints’ love for one another, Flavel writes, “O, did men think what they do for them, is done for Christ himself, it would produce other effects than are yet visible.”⁷⁸ Appealing to Matthew 25:40, Flavel argues that the relief given to a brother in

The Method of Grace. Ian C Macleod, “‘True and Nominal Christians Distinguished’: The Works of John Flavel,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 9, no. 1 (January 2017): 197–212.

⁷³ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:314.

⁷⁴ For an exploration of Flavel’s view on assurance of salvation, see Jeffrey Strickland, “The Joy of Assurance as the Essence and Expression of John Flavel’s Spirituality” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021).

⁷⁵ Sibbes argues on the basis of holiness, that because there is a sympathy between the head and the members, believers ought to grieve over their sins and spare Christ being joined with him. Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 73.

⁷⁶ Winslow concurs with the identification of Christ and his people, offering a more detailed pastoral description: “Recognize a suffering Christ in His suffering members, a persecuted Christ in His persecuted members, a poor Christ in His poor members, a despised Christ in His downtrodden members, an imprisoned Christ in His imprisoned members; a sick, a naked, a hungry Christ in those whom worldly adversity, penury, and need have smitten and laid low.” Octavius Winslow, *The Sympathy of Christ with Man* (Bottom of the Hill, 2014), 75.

⁷⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:43.

⁷⁸ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:104.

the Lord expresses love to Christ himself. “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” Flavel calls the distribution to the necessities of others—especially to the household of faith—a Scriptural duty.⁷⁹ Flavel believes that this notion should prick the consciences of the saints, moving them to practice charity—especially to the household of faith.

Flavel does not only call believers to practice sympathy toward one another, but provides guidance on how they can cultivate such an attitude of heart. He states that there are three things that promote sympathy among believers. The first is “the Lord’s pity for them; he doth as it were suffer with them.”⁸⁰ Flavel quotes Isaiah 63:9, “In all their affliction he was afflicted,” and urges his listeners to cultivate sympathy by considering Christ who bears his people’s burdens. The second is the relationship that believers have with one another. It should promote sympathy with one another. “The relation we sustain to God’s afflicted people: they are members with us in one body, and the members should have the same care of one another.”⁸¹ The third is the reality of looming personal want and suffering. This too should move the saints to practice sympathy. Because we know that we will soon need pity from others, we ought to be quick to extend compassions to others in their time of need.

Beyond this, Flavel acknowledges that suffering plays a role in the affection that exists between believers. He recognizes that “the cup of sufferings is a very bitter cup, and it is but needful that we provide somewhat to sweeten it.”⁸² One way to do this is to recognize that times of common suffering endear the saints to one another. Flavel sees these as moments of “reconciliation,” “greater endearments,” and “sincerity of heart”

⁷⁹ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:286.

⁸⁰ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:244.

⁸¹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:245.

⁸² Flavel, *Preparations for Suffering*, in *Works*, 6:4.

among God’s people. He writes, “Certainly there is something in our fellowship in the same sufferings, that is endearing and engaging.”⁸³ He appeals to Malachi 3:17 to illustrate the unity of the saints in times of mutual (or common) suffering. “They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.” For Flavel, the saints are “never more united, than when most scattered.”⁸⁴

Compassion for Those in Adam

In addition to calling believers to practice sympathy within the body of Christ, Flavel also implores them to show compassion to those who are outside the body. He speaks frequently and passionately about the Christian duty of compassion for the lost. “Unregenerate persons deserve the greatest lamentations. And were this truth heartily believed, we could not but mourn over them, with the most tender compassion and hearty sorrow.”⁸⁵ Elsewhere, he writes, “The enemies of Christ are objects of pity. . . . It is pity that any other affection than pity, should stir in our hearts toward them.”⁸⁶ Because incorporation into the body of Christ serves as the greatest honor and mercy a person can receive, it stands to reason that those outside of Christ ought to incite the mystical body’s heartfelt compassion.⁸⁷ “We should pity the unregenerate, especially our own among them; and labour to plant them in the second Adam.”⁸⁸ For this reason, Flavel urges his

⁸³ Flavel, *Preparations for Suffering*, in *Works*, 6:11.

⁸⁴ Flavel, *Preparations for Suffering*, in *Works*, 6:11.

⁸⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:430.

⁸⁶ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:373.

⁸⁷ Beeke argues that “Puritan preaching was unashamedly doctrinal.” He lists several important doctrinal considerations in Puritan evangelism including the doctrine of sin, or the depravity of being “in Adam.” Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Evangelism*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 15–16. Flavel’s evangelistic emphasis not only emerges in the way he implores sinners to come and “close with Christ,” but also in the way he invites believers to gain a heart for the lost in their compassion toward them.

⁸⁸ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:167.

listeners to prioritize the ruinous condition of perishing souls by putting on compassion towards those outside the body of Christ.

Flavel acknowledges that those who have been united to Christ are no longer “strangers” to God, but have been brought near as children. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:19, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” Because the saints know what it was like to be a stranger to Christ, they should have compassion on those outside the household of faith. “You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 23:9). Favoring “stranger” over “sojourner,” Flavel argues that those who are of the household of faith are to be compassionate toward those who are strangers, for they must have the heart of one who knows what it is like to be a stranger.⁸⁹ “Israel was commanded to be kind to strangers, for, saith God, you know the heart of a stranger. And surely if any case in the world require help, pity, and all compassionate tenderness, this doth.”⁹⁰ In sum, those who have passed from death to life ought to have an affected, compassionate heart toward those who are perishing and strangers to God.

Reasons for Compassion

According to Flavel, there are various reasons why believers should be compassionate toward the unregenerate. First, it is a means of imitating Christ, the head of the body.⁹¹ “The sight of precious souls perishing for want of the word, made the

⁸⁹ Flavel applies this text to those outside of Christ. The stranger is the one who is outside the household of faith, not united to Christ. Likewise, Bunyan employs Exodus 23:9 to denote those who are outside the household of faith, arguing that believers ought to pity the lost and pray for them. Bunyan, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*, 183.

⁹⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:167.

⁹¹ Flavel demonstrates the spiritual primacy of compassion in the mission of Christ by frequently citing Matthew 9:36: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless.” Likewise, Piper notes, “During his lifetime, he showed the connection between compassion and missions. . . . Jesus’ compassion came to expression in the call to pray for more missionaries.” John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy Of God In Missions* (Grand Rapids:

bowels of the compassionate Redeemer to yearn within him . . . and the same consideration and occasion cannot but affect and melt every soul in which is the Spirit of Christ.”⁹² Flavel suggests that believers’ desire to spread the gospel will be proportionate to their compassion for the perishing. He urges believers to show compassion on the lost by living lives in conformity to Christ’s holiness. Far too many, who profess faith in Christ, inhibit the unregenerate from coming to Christ by their scandalous lives. “It will be impossible to prevent the ruin of a great part of the world by prejudices against the ways of godliness, except those who profess them, walk more holily and conformably to the rule and pattern of Christ.”⁹³ He adds, “O professors! Where are your bowels to the poor souls of sinners?”⁹⁴ Flavel exhorts believers to conform themselves to Christ’s holiness, thereby removing any stumbling blocks that prevent their coming to faith in Christ.

Second, believers should be compassionate to those outside Christ because hell awaits them. Flavel teaches that the horrors and torments of hell are the true and just merits of sin. “The torments of hell do not exceed the demerit of sin, though they exceed the understanding of men to conceive them. God will lay upon no man more than is right.”⁹⁵ Flavel acknowledges that the torment of hell consists of eternal miseries.⁹⁶ The unconverted are in a woeful state. Their souls are cast away forever, incapable of partial

Baker Academic, 2010), 53.

⁹² Flavel, *Mount Pisgah*, in *Works*, 4:330.

⁹³ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:211

⁹⁴ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:211–12.

⁹⁵ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:147.

⁹⁶ The modern spirit asks how a God good and loving in his character could cast people into condemnation and hell. There is no contradiction in Flavel’s theology. Washer captures the spirit of Flavel’s thinking: “In light of Scripture’s assessment of fallen man, the biblically trained mind does not ask how God can set himself against men, condemn them, or even consign them to eternal separation. Rather, he asks how God can love men, justify them, and bring them into an intimate relationship with Himself without casting doubt upon His own virtue or integrity.” Paul Washer, *The Gospel Call and True Conversion* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 72.

relief by mitigation or complete relief by cessation.⁹⁷ Flavel states that those in heaven are *confirmati bono*, in a fixed, glorified condition that cannot be shaken, whereas those in hell are *malo obfirmati*, in a fixed condition of sin and misery that cannot be altered.⁹⁸ It is this condition of perishing souls that compels believers to exercise compassion.⁹⁹ “Canst thou endure the devouring wrath of God? Canst thou dwell with everlasting burnings? Hast thou fancied a tolerable hell? Or, is it easy to perish? Why doest thou not cast thyself at the feet of Christ . . . Bowels of pity, hear the cry of a soul distressed, and ready to perish.”¹⁰⁰ In sum, Flavel argues that those outside of Christ are perishing, and they need the compassion of those of the household of faith.

Third, believers should be compassionate to those outside Christ because of the eternal value of the soul. Flavel states, “One soul is of more value than the whole world.” He lists twelve reasons why, including the great price Christ paid for its redemption.¹⁰¹ “No wise man will purchase a trifle at a great price, much less the most wise God. Now the redemption of every soul stood in no less than the most precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁰² It stands to reason that Flavel appeals to the inestimable worth of the soul to entreat believers to have compassion on the lost. “It would make the bowels of a

⁹⁷ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:139.

⁹⁸ Flavel makes this statement in several places. See John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed, or The Great Work of a Christian Explained and Applied*, *Works*, 5:493. See also Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:139–40. See also Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:298.

⁹⁹ Mack argues that Christians must see through the eyes of Jesus and therefore must feel for them according to how their spiritual condition is depicted in Scripture. “To feel correctly for people, you must think correctly about them. This means rejecting thoughts that diminish others, dismiss others, or degrade them, and putting on thoughts that correspond to their relationship with God. If they are unbelievers, you should think about the fact that they are currently enemies of God and, apart from repentance, will someday experience the wrath of God. . . . the sin of those whom you have little or no compassion toward is dragging them toward an eternal hell. How can you not feel for someone who is facing that?” Joshua Mack, *Compassion: Seeing With Jesus’ Eyes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2015), 26.

¹⁰⁰ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:224.

¹⁰¹ These twelve reasons are listed in Flavel’s exposition of Matthew 16:26 in *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:155–68.

¹⁰² Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:160.

compassionate Christian to roll and yearn within him, to behold multitudes of souls of invaluable worth, running greedily on to their eternal ruin.”¹⁰³ Elsewhere, he writes, “O what compassionate tears must such a consideration as this draw from the eyes of all that understand the worth of souls!”¹⁰⁴ To the extent Christ measured the worth of the soul by his suffering and death, those in Christ ought to reckon the value of the soul a sufficient reason to have compassion on the unconverted.

Fourth, believers should be compassionate to those outside Christ because of their present condition. First, their judgment is darkened. This “deserves compassionate lamentation” because they look upon “trifles as things of greatest necessity, and the most necessary things as mere trifles.” In other words, they place the greatest concern on those things which are of lesser value. Second, they busy themselves with temporal and material things, thereby diverting their time from eternal matters. Third, they waste the season of salvation. In Flavel’s estimation, this is lamentable because it is an irrevocable season with no hope of recovery once it is gone. Fourth, they exchange fleeting pleasures for their soul. “That these deluding shadows, the pleasures of a moment are all they had in exchange for their souls, a goodly price it was valued at.”¹⁰⁵ Fifth, they bring ruin upon their children by means of their poor example. They lead their children in the same path of eternal ruin. “This is the path of those who have foolish confidence; yet after them people approve of their boasts” (Ps. 49:13).

Fifth, believers should be compassionate to those outside Christ because of three aspects of their souls. First, their souls are dead and, therefore, they cannot render any acceptable service to God. “Whilst they remain spiritually dead, they are useless and

¹⁰³ John Flavel, *The Reasonableness of Personal Reformation and the Necessity of Conversion*, in *Works*, 6:478.

¹⁰⁴ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:483.

¹⁰⁵ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:149.

wholly unserviceable unto God in the world, as any special and acceptable service unto him.”¹⁰⁶ Second, their souls have no union or communion with God; thus, they are bereft of any spiritual comforts from him, and they are unable to taste any of the sweetness found in Christ. Third, their souls have no beauty because the life of glory only begins at regeneration.

These considerations prompt Flavel to urge believers to be compassionate. They are also important for testing the validity of their profession of faith in Christ. He asks, “Can such considerations as these draw no pity from your souls, nor excite your endeavours for their regeneration? Then it is to be feared your souls are dead as well as theirs. O pity them, pity them and pray for them; in this case only, prayers for the dead are our duty.”¹⁰⁷ Flavel recognizes that God may hear these prayers and welcome back lost prodigals with great joy.

The Conditions of the Lost

Though he argues that every unconverted person deserves the pity and compassion of the body of Christ, Flavel does distinguish between the various conditions of the lost. First, there are hypocrites and temporary believers. He calls these people “twice dead,” for though these trees might recover through pruning, dressing, and watering, they decay again and wither unto a second death. Flavel writes, “Just thus stands the case with false and hypocritical professors, who though they were still under the power of spiritual death, yet in the beginning of their profession, they seemed to be alive . . . but wanting a root of regeneration, they quickly began to wither and cast their untimely fruit.”¹⁰⁸ In accord with 2 Peter 2:20–21, Flavel notes that their portion is the

¹⁰⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:431.

¹⁰⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:431.

¹⁰⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:430.

saddest of any who die without Christ.¹⁰⁹ It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness because they will receive a double measure of wrath.

Second, there are those with distressed consciences, burdened with a sense of guilt and sin. “Is there such a burden in sin, then the most tender compassion is a debt due to souls afflicted and heavy laden with sin. Their condition cries for pity.”¹¹⁰ Flavel appeals to Job 19:21, “Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me!” Flavel urges those who suffer under an afflicted conscience to learn from their experience and extend proportionate tenderness to those of like situation. He also argues that a distressed conscience is part of the torments of hell in the present life. Their situation “calls upon all for the tenderest pity, and utmost help from man.” He adds, “All that can be done for their relief, is by seasonable, judicious, and tender applications of spiritual remedies: And what can be done, ought to be done for them.”¹¹¹ In Flavel’s estimation, those who have felt the coming terrors of hell and the subsequent comforts of Christ ought to show the greatest degrees of pity and compassion.

Third, there are those who give no thought to eternal matters and the eternal destiny of their soul. According to Flavel, they are busied with trifles. While they understand the worth of created things, they do not consider the dignity of the soul. They pursue the knowledge of the created world, but do not pursue the knowledge of God. Flavel calls them the “deluded multitude,” adding, “There be those that have almost finished the course of a long life . . . who never yet spent one solemn entire hour in discourse with their own souls.”¹¹² Despite the fact that human nature has been endowed

¹⁰⁹ “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.”

¹¹⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:167.

¹¹¹ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:146.

¹¹² Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:482.

with the capacity of self-reflection, it has been received in vain. Most people strive with their minds for the knowledge of the world, not of the Creator.¹¹³ This should melt believers to compassion. “O what compassionate tears must such a consideration as this draw from the eyes.”¹¹⁴ In this way, Flavel implores his listeners to take urgent care for the soul at the expense of the provision of the body.

Material Relief and Spiritual Interest

Flavel explicitly teaches that believers ought to seek first Christ’s interests and the advancement of his kingdom. Wealth, crowns, and estates are subordinate to the exercise and improvement of faith in Christ. “Those that have the Spirit of Christ do not more earnestly long after any one thing in this world, than the advancement of Christ’s interest by conversion and reformation in the kingdoms of the earth.”¹¹⁵ Elsewhere, Flavel writes, “Your interest is never more prosperously managed, or abundantly secured, than when it is carried on in a due subordination to God’s.”¹¹⁶ Accordingly, he places a definitive accent on spiritual poverty over material want. He uses the word “poor” to describe a burdened and distressed soul. Likewise, he frequently employs the word “relief” to describe the inward consolations and ministrations of God to the soul. “When all other reliefs have been essayed, it is the blood of this great sacrifice, sprinkled by faith on the trembling conscience, that must cool, refresh, and sweetly compose and settle it.”¹¹⁷ In this way, Flavel urges believers to exercise compassion in gospel work, faithfully proclaiming Christ’s willingness to receive sinners.

¹¹³ Flavel admits that this was his condition before he came to Christ. He was overly busied with the “child’s clothes” rather than the “child” himself—concern for his body rather than his soul.

¹¹⁴ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 2:483.

¹¹⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:337.

¹¹⁶ Flavel, *Navigation Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:294.

¹¹⁷ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:143.

Flavel acknowledges the goodness of a compassionate spirit in providing temporal relief. He “was bountiful to his own relations, and very charitable to the poor, but especially to the household of faith, and the necessitous members of his own church, to whom, during their sickness, he always sent suitable supplies.”¹¹⁸ On several occasions, Flavel praises John Fox, who never denied a beggar when asked for money.¹¹⁹ Flavel also exhorts believers to provide material relief.¹²⁰ However, he never divorces these forms of relief from spiritual interests.¹²¹ In other words, Flavel exhorts believers to give charitable relief with reference to Christ and his kingdom.¹²² In this way, the church provides compassionate material relief with reference to the interests of Christ.¹²³ Flavel makes this connection between material relief and spiritual interest in various ways.

First, God commands his people to attend to the material wants of their neighbors.¹²⁴ In his exposition of the eighth commandment, Flavel acknowledges that

¹¹⁸ “The Life of the Late Rev. John Flavel of Dartmouth,” in *Works*, 1:xvi.

¹¹⁹ See John Flavel, *Gospel Unity Recommended to the Churches of Christ*, in *Works*, 3:594. See also Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:233.

¹²⁰ Stott articulates this notion in Christian theology. “The Holy Spirit gives his people a tender social conscience. . . . So then a living church is a caring church. Generosity has always been a characteristic of the people of God. Our God is a generous God; his church must be generous too.” John Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 28.

¹²¹ Beeke summarizes some of the connection between faith and good works: “Here then is a litmus test to see if our works truly shine: To be a good work, it must follow the precepts and principles of the Bible; arise from a new, believing heart given by the Holy Spirit; and aim at the good of others so that God is honored.” Joel R Beeke and Paul M Smalley, “Learning from the Puritans on Being Salt and Light,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 11, no. 2 (July 2019): 171.

¹²² Macaskill links the moral identity of believers with their union with Christ. “By linking Jesus’ past and future to Christian moral identity and understanding that identity as constituted by the acting presence of Christ in our lives now, we see it in terms very different from the ones in which it is often cast.” Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul’s Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 115.

¹²³ Clowney agrees stating, “Fellowship in compassion includes fellowship in material blessings: those who share a common life will share daily bread and clothing.” Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 81. Yet, while it should be noted that while Clowney primarily uses the language of compassion to denote material sharing and relief, he does so emphasizing that all should be done “in the name of Christ.” Even when material help is refused along with the gospel, Christian’s still seek opportunity to share Christ. See also page 214.

¹²⁴ Swinnock argues that it is the Christian man’s duty to practice such compassion, noting that he who does not disowns God’s authority and denies his image. George Swinnock, *The Christian Man’s Calling, or, A Treatise of Making Religion Ones Business Wherein the Christian Is Directed How to*

God requires his people to communicate their wealth to those in need. “It requires us not only to get and keep the things of the world in a lawful manner, but to distribute and communicate them to those that are in want, and not cast them into temptations of sin, or inevitable ruin.”¹²⁵ Notably, Flavel acknowledges that this material supply does serve a spiritual interest, namely, that those in need would not succumb to temptation and spiritual ruin. Flavel appeals to several texts including Isaiah 58:10: “If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.” He also cites 1 John 3:17, “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how goes God’s love abide in him?”¹²⁶

Second, Flavel responds to an objection concerning a person’s ability or inability to supply the needs of others. What if someone does not have money to provide material relief to those in need? Flavel responds, “If you cannot, it ceases to be your duty, and God accepts the drawing out of your soul to the hungry in compassion and desire to help them, though you cannot draw forth a full purse to relieve and supply them.”¹²⁷ In this way, believers may keep their heart by discerning between sin and affliction. He acknowledges, “Your poverty is not your sin, but your affliction only! If by sinful means you have not brought it upon yourself; and if it be but an affliction, it may be borne the easier for that.”¹²⁸ Believers are required to glorify God from the heart, cultivating holiness as well as a charitable spirit. Thus, believers may honor God in Christian charity

Perform It (London, 1665), 589–90.

¹²⁵ Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:246.

¹²⁶ Flavel refers to Colossians 3:12 on one occasion. In it, he argues for a compassionate Spirit toward spiritual matters directly (burdens of sin) and personal afflictions. See Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:244.

¹²⁷ Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:462.

¹²⁸ Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:462.

despite having inadequate means.

Third, believers ought to provide charitable relief, knowing that what is given to the saints is given to Christ. In reference to Christ mystical, Flavel writes, “Christ the Lord of heaven and earth, in this consideration is sometimes in need of a penny; he tells us his wants and poverty, and how he is relieved.”¹²⁹ He goes on to appeal to Christ’s words in Matthew 25:35, 40: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” For Flavel, this text expresses the whole of obedience. “Men’s eternal states are cast according to their observance of this command; though I fear few, very few study and believe it as they ought.”¹³⁰ Believers have a spiritual duty to Christ and, therefore, his body. They express love to Christ whenever they provide relief to the saints.

Fourth, the act of thanking God for his charitable mercies leads believers to provide material relief to the poor. Believers are to be thankful, knowing that all good things come from God’s hand. “The thankful man must not only observe what mercies he hath, and from who they come, but must particularly consider them in their natures, degrees, seasons, and manner of conveyance.”¹³¹ Flavel calls believers to be thankful, not only because God commands it, but because ingratitude leads to deprivation, distress, and want. “He that gives no thanks for one mercy, hath little ground to expect another.”¹³² Importantly, Flavel believes that those who remember God’s good gifts will not withhold compassionate relief from those in need. He exhorts, “Use all God’s mercies with

¹²⁹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:43.

¹³⁰ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:286.

¹³¹ John Flavel, *The Seaman’s Companion: Six Sermons on the Mysteries of Providence as Relating to Seamen; and the Sins, Dangers, Duties and Troubles of Seamen*, in *Works*, 5:408.

¹³² Flavel, *The Seaman’s Companion*, in *Works*, 5:412.

thankfulness; God will remember them in fury, who forget him in his favours. And think not what God bestows upon you is wholly for your own use: but honour God with your mercies by clothing the naked and feeding the hungry, especially such as are godly.”¹³³ In this way, Flavel encourages all believers to honor the Lord through thanksgiving, that it may lead them to supply the want of those in need.

Fifth, the doctrine of the resurrection gives believers sufficient reason to meet the needs of the saints. Flavel posits that Christ not only rose from the dead as the first fruits of the resurrection, but that his resurrection functions as the meritorious cause (completing the satisfaction), efficient cause (quickened by the head), and exemplary cause (fashioned or patterned according to Christ) of believers who will be raised up to glory on the day of judgment. Because of this, Flavel argues that it is the duty of the saints to govern and use their bodies in the consciousness of what awaits them in the resurrection. One of the ways believers do so is by putting aside personal wants of the body for the relief of others. “With-hold not, upon the pretence of the wants your bodies may be in, that which God and conscience bid you to communicate for the refreshment of the saints, whose present necessities require your assistance.”¹³⁴ Flavel goes on to write, “Certainly, the consideration of that reward which shall be given you at the resurrection for every act of Christian charity, is the greatest spur and incentive in the world to it.”¹³⁵ In sum, believers may expend their energies in the knowledge of a coming reality, the reward of a fully restored body in the resurrection.

Sixth, believers ought to maintain a Christ-like humility in all their acts of charity lest they fall into pride and selfishness. Appealing to the words of Judas in John

¹³³ Flavel, *The Seaman’s Companion*, in *Works*, 5:410-11.

¹³⁴ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:498.

¹³⁵ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:498.

12:5, Flavel acknowledges that any sinner may use religion to accomplish selfish ends.¹³⁶ “Here was charity to the poor, or rather poor charity; for this was only a blind to his base self-ends. O Christian, be plain-hearted, take heed of craft and cunning in matters of religion: This spoiled Judas.”¹³⁷ In contrast, Flavel calls believers to a Christ-like humility, operating with a silent modesty in all their acts of kindness to others. “When he had expressed his charity in his acts of mercy and bounty to men, he would humbly seal up the glory of it, with this charge; ‘see ye tell no man of it.’”¹³⁸ Flavel calls believers to imitate this pattern and beware of pride, acknowledging that the propensity to sin corrupts the best actions. “Your charity for others may be your duty, but your too great confidence may be your snare. Fear what others may do, but fear thyself more.”¹³⁹

Seventh, Flavel relates material want to spiritual interest by illustrating the danger of trusting personal righteousness through material poverty. While the sinner must come empty-handed to God for mercy, the proud heart will not in humility renounce its own righteousness. He writes, “Pride stiffens the will that it cannot stoop or condescend to declare their own emptiness, discover their own shame, and live wholly upon the righteousness of another.”¹⁴⁰ In his estimation, this makes faith in Christ difficult, for the sinner desires to rest on his righteousness. He compares this situation to the impoverished who would prefer, in their pride, their poverty rather than receive charity from another. “It is natural to men rather to eat a brown crust, or wear a coarse ragged garment which they can call their own, than to feed upon the richest dainties, or wear the costliest garments which they must receive as an alms or gift from another.”¹⁴¹ Flavel admits that

¹³⁶ “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?”

¹³⁷ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:290.

¹³⁸ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:440.

¹³⁹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:295.

¹⁴⁰ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:45.

¹⁴¹ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:46.

such pride often exists as the last bastion that prevents “the match” between Christ and the soul. All must come to Christ empty-handed and without qualification.

Conclusion

By virtue of their union with Christ, believers become members of Christ mystical, the church. They are regenerate, united to Christ by the Spirit and faith. Because of this mystical union, they are united to one another in a moral union, which consists of love and affection. Flavel acknowledges that such affection is a natural outworking of their union with Christ, and it is a duty that members have toward one another. Hence, membership in Christ mystical serves as the governing principle by which believers live out compassion in their lives.

Flavel acknowledges that believers imitate Christ’s compassionate nature. By virtue of their union with him, they receive a new inclination congruent with the head, enabling them to express the compassion of Christ. By virtue of their membership with one another, they are commanded to practice the duty of sympathy within the body of Christ. Flavel calls this a debt that believers owe to Christ mystical. As such, the saints suffer with the other members of the body. By virtue of their moral union with one another, believers bear one another’s burdens and increase in affection toward one another. By virtue of their mystical union with Christ and moral union with one another, believers ought to have the greatest pity and compassion toward the lost, those outside the household of faith. Their separation from Christ ought to stir believers’ bowels of compassion. This will be evident in supplying material and spiritual relief, for there is no temporal mercy that can be divorced from spiritual interests.

CHAPTER 5

THE TENDER-HEARTED MINISTER: THE CHRISTOLOGICAL SHAPE OF PASTORAL CARE

Notwithstanding his considerable attention to theological detail, it would be a mischaracterization to depict Flavel divorced from his pastoral identity. His preaching wades into the depth of Scripture and skillfully weds truth to application, revealing an acute understanding of his sheep and the thoughts and intentions of the human soul. Demonstrating the warmth of a tender shepherd, many of his introductory letters to his works express Flavel’s affection for his congregation and reveal a heavy burden for their suffering.¹ Cosby asserts, “It should be clear that his chief concern throughout his ministry fell with his Dartmouth congregation—with a desire to encourage their growth in the knowledge of and love for God.”² Likewise, Ferguson acknowledges Flavel’s pastoral identity: “Flavel exemplified the Puritan vision of the godly minister and faithful preacher.”³ Without question, his ministerial vision profoundly influenced many eminent pastors and evangelists including Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield.⁴ Notably, Archibald Alexander stated, “To John Flavel I certainly owe more than to any uninspired author.”⁵ Indeed, Flavel’s laborious, careful shepherding not only endeared him to his

¹ For example, in his introductory letter to his extensive treatise entitled *England’s Duty*, Flavel exhorts ministers to have the same “bowels of compassion” for the sheep as does the chief shepherd. John Flavel, *England’s Duty Under the Present Gospel Liberty*, in *Works*, 4:14.

² Brian Cosby, “The Theology of Suffering and Sovereignty as Seen in the Writings and Ministry of John Flavel, c.1630–1691” (PhD diss., Australian College of Theology, 2012), 41.

³ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Some Pastors and Teachers* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2017), 310.

⁴ See Boone’s remarks regarding the popularity and use of Flavel’s written works. Clifford B. Boone, *Puritan Evangelism: Preaching for Conversion in Late-Seventeenth Century English Puritanism* (London: Paternoster, 2013), 41–46.

⁵ Christopher Lensch, “Two Early American Presbyterian Pastor-Theologians: Samuel Davies

congregation at Dartmouth, but also inspired future generations of pastors in the gospel ministry.

As a pastor, Flavel exemplified a vision of soul care concerned fundamentally with the knowledge of Christ. It is for this reason that Flavel argued that the knowledge (and knowing) of Christ ought to “inform us by what rule to judge both ministers and doctrine. . . He is the best artist, that can most lively and powerfully display Jesus Christ before the people, evidently setting him forth as crucified among them.”⁶ Yet, this knowledge was not a general or superficial understanding of Christ. Rather, it maintained specific doctrinal focus. Flavel’s Christological attention includes the person and work of Christ, the application of redemption in union with Christ, and the responsibilities of believers in the duties of faith and religion as members of Christ’s mystical body. Along these lines, his Christology provides shape for his pastoral care and the application of compassion. His pastoral care inherently emphasizes compassion because it arises from an exposition and application of the tender-hearted minister himself, Christ. Essentially, Flavel’s threefold Christological focus serves as a pattern (or that which gives form) for his understanding of the tender-hearted minister and his office, as well as the application of compassion in his pastoral care. Flavel’s Christology leads to a diverse collection of pastoral applications of compassion in his preaching and counsel.

The Tender-Hearted Minister and His Office

Flavel acknowledges an intentional order to God’s house. “The church is a well-ordered family, or household, whereof Christ is the Head, Christians members, ministers stewards Everyone is to keep his own place and station. Pastors must

and Archibald Alexander,” *Western Reformed Seminary Journal* 12, no. 2 (August 2005): 26.

⁶ John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life: A Display of Christ in His Essential and Mediatorial Glory*, in *Works*, 1:39.

faithfully feed and govern the flocks of Christ.”⁷ As such, he argues that the pastoral office is not a human invention, but rather a distinct office ordained by God. In his physical absence from the church, Christ appointed a succession of ministers to build the church and carry on his gospel work.⁸ Biblical requisites for employment include proper qualification (2 Timothy 3) and a solemn call (Romans 10:14–15).⁹ Throughout his works, Flavel refers to ministers as pastors, ambassadors, stewards of God’s house, husbandmen of God’s field, witnesses, and shepherds. In *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor*, he argues that pastors are the “chief servants of Christ’s house. . . . To them he hath committed the dispensation of the word and sacraments, which contain the great mysteries of the kingdom of God.”¹⁰

He also asserts that Christ is present with his people through the ministerial office. “There is a represented presence of Christ in ordinances. As the person of a king is represented in another country by his *Ambassadors*, so is Christ in this world by his ministers.”¹¹ It is for this reason that he argues that any abuses done to Christ’s ministers are done to Christ himself. Likewise, an exceptional dignity resides in the office because pastors serve as representatives of Christ.¹² “The Lord Jesus himself is represented by

⁷ John Flavel, *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor*, in *Works*, 6:580.

⁸ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:119. Martin Bucer also emphasized this point in his pastoral theology. “Our dear Lord Jesus is truly present in his church, ruling, leading, and feeding it himself. But he effects and carries out this his rule and the feeding of his lambs in such a way as to remain always in his heavenly nature, that is, in his divine and intangible state, because he has left this world. Therefore it has pleased him to exercise his rule, protection and care . . . outwardly and tangibly through his ministers and instruments.” Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, trans. Peter Beale (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 17.

⁹ John Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:448.

¹⁰ Flavel, *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor*, in *Works*, 6:567.

¹¹ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:32.

¹² Perkins also notes the exceptional dignity placed on ministers, stating that he should receive the “double honor” as a proclaimer of righteousness. William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying with The Calling of the Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 107. Beeke warns against the professionalization of the pastorate, arguing that ministerial office is one of dignity. Its dignity, however, is not found in self-aggrandizement, but rather in the eternal significance of the work. Joel R. Beeke, “Unprofessional Puritans and Professional Pastors: What the Puritans Would Say to Modern Pastors,”

them, they stand in his stead, his authority is clothed upon them; the honour and dishonor given them redound to the person of Christ.”¹³ The connection, however, is not representative only, but derivative. He acknowledges that ministers are like stars, which shine with borrowed light from the sun.¹⁴ Christ is the fountain and source of light distributed to all his ministers that they might faithfully represent him in the world. Similarly, Flavel depicts the close connection between Christ and his ordained ministers through a call to ministerial compassion, embedded in his doctrine of Christ.

The Tender-Hearted Minister and the Person of Christ

Flavel teaches that the person of Christ functions as the example of compassion for all ordained pastors. As the Great Shepherd of the sheep, Christ had compassion on the multitudes because they were as those with no shepherd.¹⁵ “After the pattern of those tender bowels of Christ, the chief shepherd, do the bowels of compassion infused by him into his ministers, the under-shepherds, work and move towards the flock, in like cases and exigencies.”¹⁶ Flavel understands that pastors have an imitative call to follow Christ’s example.¹⁷ As the Lord exemplified long-suffering, so too ministers ought to practice a compassionate Christ-like patience.¹⁸ Considering young converts, Flavel

Puritan Reformed Journal 6 (January 1, 2014): 190–91.

¹³ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:39.

¹⁴ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:123.

¹⁵ Matthew 9:36 “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

¹⁶ John Flavel, *Antipharum Saluberrimum, or A Serious and Seasonable Caveat to all the Saints in this Hour of Temptation*, in *Works*, 4:517.

¹⁷ James Alexander notes that all Christians are to follow Christ’s example. He maintains that it is imperative in a higher sense for ministers. In the constellation of graces of Christ for ministers to imitate, Alexander mentions Christ’s tenderness, representative of his ministry. J. W. Alexander, “The Lord Jesus Christ the Example of the Minister,” in *The Pastor: His Call, Character, and Work* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2021), 42.

¹⁸ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:74.

suggests that a pastor's tender charge over them ought to exceed that of a nurse over the sick. He goes on to exhort pastors to imitate the Great Shepherd of the sheep, for "they lie exposed to all dangers, they are credulous, and seducers cunning; they want judgment to discern truth from error; have not yet attained unto senses exercised, and age in Christ to discern good from evil."¹⁹ In the diversity of needs among the flock, Christ's ministers ought to display a discerning compassion, following the pattern of the Lord in all his tender care over his sheep.

Like Christ, who assumed a human nature with all its sinless infirmities, Flavel suggests that a part of the pastor's calling rests on his understanding of humanity's weaknesses, wants, and pains. This is the reason why God did not ordain and commission angels as his ambassadors. Though created with a greater degree of glory, they lack an experimental understanding of human nature.

They being creatures of another rank and kind, and not partaking with us, either in the misery of the fall, or benefit of the recovery by Christ, it is not to be supposed they should speak to us so feelingly and experimentally, as these his ministers do; they can open to you the mysteries of sin, feeling the workings thereof daily in their own hearts; they can discover to you the conflicts of the flesh and Spirit, as being daily exercised in that warfare.²⁰

Elsewhere, Flavel acknowledges the importance of the pastor's affections, having known condemnation and misery as well as the terrors and consolations of God's Spirit. Christ's ambassadors preach and counsel "feelingly" and "affectionately" to move others by their experimental knowledge.²¹

Furthermore, Flavel argues that the standard of Christ serves as a fitting test for ministers in all their ministerial endeavors. He writes, "And as it will serve us for a test of doctrines, so it serves for a test of ministers; and hence you may judge who are

¹⁹ Flavel, *The Righteous Man's Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:486.

²⁰ John Flavel, *The Method of Grace in Gospel Redemption*, in *Works*, 2:53.

²¹ Flavel, *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor*, in *Works*, 6:572.

authorized and sent by Christ the great Prophet, to declare his will to men.”²² He goes on to explain how Christ serves as a test for ministers in several characteristics, including tender-heartedness. Flavel, therefore, assumes that a pastor who shows a hard heart does not show a commission or authorization for ministerial work.²³ It stands to reason that he regards a compassionate spirit as a duty of pastors. Among five duties he lists of pastors in his *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, he writes that a minister ought “to be full of bowels of tender affection” to his people.²⁴ He appeals to 1 Thessalonians 2:7, “But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.” In his estimation, those whom Christ sends to his church will have his Spirit in their hearts. Because those called will strive to imitate the Great Shepherd, the pastor’s tender and compassionate heart toward the flock serves as an apt test to judge his authorization by Christ.

Flavel uses numerous examples to describe how a pastor ought to exercise pastoral compassion and tender heartedness. For example, while he admits that it is a lamentable circumstance for people to be without the regular preaching of the gospel, he also states that pastors ought to have compassion for those who sit under the ministry of the Word and whose hearts experience no conviction or affection.²⁵ Elsewhere, Flavel encourages pastors to exercise discipline with compassion.²⁶ “And when we must apply

²² Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:128.

²³ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:129.

²⁴ John Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism*, in *Works*, 6:238.

²⁵ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:187.

²⁶ Prime and Begg appeal to Paul’s words ‘with tears’ in Acts 20:31 to communicate the spirit of discipline: “The addition of the words ‘with tears’ provides an important clue as to how admonition and correction are to be exercised—they require compassion, the spirit of a father caring for his children.” Derek J. Prime and Alistair Begg, *On Being a Pastor: Understanding Our Calling and Work* (Chicago: Moody, 2004), 55. Bridges intimates a similar posture towards discipline: “The recollection of our own former state (not to speak of our present sympathy with them as their fellow-sinners) will give a considerate tenderness to our reproof.” Charles Bridges, *Christian Ministry: With an Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 301.

the precious oil of reproof to them, that we work it in with the warm, soft, gentle hand of love and compassion; and then the reproof is like to do good, and the reprovèd receive thanks for his kindness.”²⁷ In all of this, Flavel acknowledges the necessity of a varied methodological approach according to different subjects and the state of their consciences. He admits that “knotty pieces need greater wedges and harder blows to rive them asunder, and as he directs his ministers.”²⁸ A varied approach not only includes tender compassion, but also firm strokes of reproof. Such an approach is Christ-like, as the Great Shepherd of the sheep knocks on the consciousness of many souls in various ways.²⁹

Several pastoral implications follow from an understanding of the tender compassion of Christ. First, ministers ought to be tender-hearted pastors, embodying the same compassionate nature as Christ.³⁰ “His bowels yearned when he saw the multitude, as sheep having no shepherd. These bowels of Christ must be in all the under shepherds.”³¹ Flavel also appeals to Paul’s pastoral bearing as described in Philippians 1:8, “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.” As

²⁷ Flavel, *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor*, in *Works*, 6:578.

²⁸ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:99.

²⁹ Beeke suggests that having tears—that is compassion for lost souls—is one of Paul’s marks for authentic ministry. Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, “Authentic Ministry: Servanthood, Tears, and Temptations,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 4 (January 1, 2012): 269–72.

³⁰ While the point may be obvious, the compassionate pastoral disposition is not unimportant. This qualification for ministerial service enjoys a long line of support in human history. Gregory the Great acknowledges that “true preachers not only aspire through contemplation to the holy head of the Church (in other words, to the Lord) but they also descend to the needs of the members through compassion.” Saint Gregory, *The Book of Pastoral Rule: St. Gregory the Great*, trans. George E. Demacopoulos (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), 59. Many of the Puritans took the time to state and expound on the fact that ministers ought to have a tender heart towards the sheep. Yuille expands on Swinnock’s prayer to be like a tender mother toward the flock, acknowledging that he asked God to maintain a “sincere affection” for his people.” J. Stephen Yuille, *A Labor of Love: Puritan Pastoral Priorities* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 38. Lloyd-Jones captures the danger in preaching of a lack of tenderheartedness succinctly: “The trouble with some of us is that we love preaching, but we are not always careful to make sure that we love the people to whom we are actually preaching. If you lack this element of compassion for the people you will also lack the pathos which is a very vital element in all true preaching.” D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 105.

³¹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:129.

Christ was tender-hearted to sinners, so also ministers ought to have the same nature as that of the Great Shepherd.³² Without question, Flavel does not hold that ministers share in the same divine nature as Christ. Yet, as representatives, they must demonstrate the same character as Christ.

Second, Flavel implies (and demonstrates) that pastors ought to direct believers to apply themselves to Christ's compassionate nature.³³ He exhorts believers to do this because he is "one that is tenderly sensible of your case, and most willing and ready to relieve you. O remember, this was one of the inducements that persuaded and invited him to take your nature, that he might be furnished abundantly with tender compassion for you."³⁴ For example, in order to fortify and encourage faith in seasons of inexplicable afflictive providence, he encourages believers to reflect over Christ's tender care for them.³⁵ If he has never failed you yet, Flavel ponders, why would he do so now? Additionally, He comforts believers in their fears over sin by rehearsing Christ's tender nature in his interaction with the disciples.³⁶ In other instances, Flavel applies Christ's compassionate nature by exhorting believers to become sincerely and profoundly affected with their sin. "Labour to affect your hearts with the sins that have incensed God's indignation . . . O who that loves God can refrain tears, to see the God of pity, the God of tender mercies, a Father full of bowels of compassion, so incensed and provoked to

³² While rightly noting that Puritan ministers understood that their personal charity and compassion impacted their witness, Donagan mistakenly strikes a more pragmatic tone to the Puritan motivation to show compassion to others, suggesting that clerical charity contributed to ministerial success. Barbara Donagan, "Puritan Ministers and Laymen: Professional Claims and Social Constraints in Seventeenth Century England," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1984): 88–89.

³³ Beeke asserts that "much of the comfort the Puritans offer grows out of the very nature of God." Joel R Beeke, "Reading the Puritans," *SBJT* 14, no. 4 (2010): 20.

³⁴ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:234.

³⁵ John Flavel, *Divine Conduct, or the Mystery of Providence*, in *Works*, 4:462. See also 4:465.

³⁶ John Flavel, *Preparations for Suffering, or The Best Work in the Worst Times*, in *Works*, 6:24.

indignation.”³⁷ In sum, Flavel affirms that pastors, reflecting and representing the compassion of Christ, endeavor to apply believers to Christ’s tender nature.

Third, an understanding of Christ’s compassionate nature implies that pastors maintain a hopeful disposition in all their ministerial labors. Flavel acknowledges that there is a temptation to cast the world off in hopelessness. Appealing to the story of Jonah, he acknowledges that even God’s warnings are inextricably tied to his compassion.³⁸

Many faithful ministers of Christ said within themselves, God hath no more work for us to do, and we shall have no more opportunities to work for God: when lo, beyond the thoughts of all hearts, the merciful and long-suffering Redeemer makes one return more to these nations, renews the treaty, and with compassions rolled together, speaks to us this day, as to Ephraim of old, how shall I deliver thee?³⁹

In this way, Flavel acknowledges that the pastor’s hopefulness lies not with himself or his office. Instead, the hope of the pastor for fruitful labor rests in the compassionate nature of Christ which strives against the “desponding thoughts” and the “unbelieving fears” of ministers. Essentially, the tender nature of Christ grounds the hopeful carriage of all his ambassadors.

The Tender-Hearted Minister and Union with Christ

Flavel argues that God appoints all gospel ordinances and officers for the grand design of applying Christ to the souls of men. He states that “the great aim and scope of all Christ’s ordinances and officers, are to bring men into union with Christ, and so build

³⁷ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:333.

³⁸ “And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster” (Jonah 4:2).

³⁹ John Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity, or the Signs of Grace and Symptoms of Hypocrisy*, in *Works*, 4:85.

them up to perfection in him; or to unite them to, and confirm them in Christ.”⁴⁰ Simply stated, God principally designs the ministerial office for the espousing of sinners to Christ. Appealing to 2 Corinthians 5:20, Flavel argues that the design of “espousing sinners to Christ” necessitates ambassadors, men commissioned to reconcile the world to God.⁴¹ “Ministers are instruments of espousing souls to Christ, and witnesses to those espousals and contracts made betwixt him and them.”⁴² These ambassadors (or pastors) are to act in Christ’s stead, humbly entreating and alluring sinners to come to Christ. In Flavel’s estimation, there can be no union between sinners and Christ without a gospel overture to the soul. As Romans 10:14 states, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”

Flavel, therefore, argues that the ministerial office reveals the mercy of God. “God’s mercy is eminently discovered in the institution of . . . the ministerial office.”⁴³ In other words, God extends his mercy through his appointed ambassadors and, therefore, the office (and the appointment of pastors) reveals God’s tender care over his people. God appoints a means to help apply Christ to men. From this, Flavel infers several things. First, Christ’s ambassadors deserve a welcome and dignity because of their appointment. Flavel suggests that they are owed a much better welcome and entertainment than they are given in the world. Second, Flavel argues that Satan’s malicious hatred is also discovered in his opposition to the pastor and his work. While Christ sends

⁴⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:20.

⁴¹ “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

⁴² Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:22. Elsewhere, Flavel writes, “All Christ’s ordinances are instituted, and his officers for no other use or end but the salvation of souls.” John Flavel, *Pneumatologia: A Treatise of the Soul of Man*, in *Works*, 2:479.

⁴³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:60.

“ambassadors,” Satan sends “opposers.”⁴⁴ There should be no surprise that Satan and his forces seek to destroy Christ’s ambassadors and their work.

Flavel goes on to argue that the office of the minister is a mercy from God, especially as it relates to the evangelical light of the preached Word.⁴⁵ Because there is no spiritual health without the ministration of the Word, “learn hence, what an invaluable mercy it is to enjoy the gospel in its light and liberty, which is so great a relief to the distressed consciences of sinners.”⁴⁶ He argues that those who live under paganism and popery have no mercies to relieve their distressed conscience. The papist can offer no mercy beyond penance and pilgrimages. The pagan has no knowledge of Christ and can find no rest from the things of nature.⁴⁷ He writes, “Judge from hence what an invaluable mercy the preaching of the word is to the world: It is a blessing far above our estimation of it; little do we know what a treasure God committeth to us in the ordinances.”⁴⁸ As the ambassador appointed to apply Christ to men, the standing office of the minister remains a steady compassion in the preaching of the gospel of reconciliation.

It stands to reason that Flavel believes it is a sign of judgment when the shepherds are cut off. Because they are God’s messengers, a scarcity of the means of salvation indicates “a sore judgment, and a dreadful token of God’s indignation and wrath.”⁴⁹ This is especially true in times of persecution. He argues that there are various evil signs that God’s judgment is near. The persecution of God’s ministers is one of these

⁴⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:60.

⁴⁵ The literature on Puritanism and preaching is voluminous. Succinctly stated, Kevan notes that Puritan ministers dedicated their energy to the pulpit. Citing Haller, he notes that most of their publications are their sermons: “Puritanism cannot be understood apart from the Puritan pulpit.” Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2003), 19.

⁴⁶ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:155.

⁴⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:179.

⁴⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:300. See also 2:179.

⁴⁹ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:176.

signs.⁵⁰ He appeals to 2 Chronicles 36:15–16, “The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets.” Even so, Flavel shows that seasons bereft of gospel proclamation provoke the compassion in Christ. Appealing to Matthew 9:36, he explains that the sheep without a shepherd is the very reason Christ had compassion on the scattered multitudes.⁵¹

Several implications follow. First, pastors acknowledge that the soul is of greatest value.⁵² Flavel describes the invaluable worth of the soul in his *Pneumatologia*, explaining that its value may be deduced from the manner of its creation, its noble faculties and powers, its capacity to receive grace and glory, the preparations and price made for its purchase, and the eternal implications tied to its allegiance.⁵³ Additionally, he goes on to suggest that the soul’s worth is clearly evident from the tender care God places over it. “It is no small evidence of the precious and invaluable worth of souls, that God manifests so great and tender care over them, and is so much concerned about the evil that befalls them.”⁵⁴ God’s “condescending tenderness” over the soul may be seen in times of distress and danger. Even so, this tenderness is evidenced in his “severe prohibitions,” warning men that they ought not to abuse their liberty and place a

⁵⁰ Flavel, *Preparations for Suffering*, in *Works*, 6:14. See also Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:341.

⁵¹ “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

⁵² Baxter sounds a similar compassionate note on evangelism: “In compassion of your sinful miserable souls, the Lord, that better knows your case than you can know it, hath made it our duty to speak to you in his name, 2 Cor 5:19, and to tell you plainly of your sin and misery, and what will be your end, and how sad a change you will shortly see, if yet your go on a little longer.” Richard Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted, to Turn and Live* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace, 2000), 21.

⁵³ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:155–67.

⁵⁴ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:166.

stumbling block of ruin in front of others.

It is for this reason that ministers ought to have compassion principally on people's souls. Flavel writes, "Be filled with tender affections toward the souls of men, with whom you treat for reconciliation: you had need be men of bowels, as well as men of brains."⁵⁵ It makes sense, then, that Flavel includes the ordination of pastors as another evidence of the soul's precious worth. Speaking of the appointment of gospel officers, he states, "No man would light and maintain a lamp fed with golden oil, and keep it burning from age to age, if the work to be done by the light of it were not of a very precious and important nature: what else are the dispensations of the gospel, but lamps burning with golden oil to light souls to heaven?"⁵⁶ In sum, Flavel's pastoral theology places a premium on the soul, exhorting pastors to cut through vain hopes of heaven with compassion so that people might be saved from eternal misery.

Second, the pastorate is an evangelistic office and evangelism a compassionate endeavor.⁵⁷ Flavel's emphasis on evangelism can hardly be overstated, leading Boone to argue that his commitment to God's effectual call fundamentally influenced "the content, arrangement and presentation of his sermons to the unconverted."⁵⁸ Examples abound that connect the pastor's evangelistic work to compassion.⁵⁹ He suggests that the thought

⁵⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:64.

⁵⁶ Flavel, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:163.

⁵⁷ As Packer makes clear, while it was not part of the Puritan vocabulary, evangelism was clearly one of Puritanism's chief concerns—conceived as the conversion of the soul by God's sovereign work. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 291. William Still noted that while evangelists are separate gifts to the church apart from pastors and teachers, "the pastor must be an evangelist all the time—all are evangelists in the primary sense of showing forth Christ." William Still, *The Work of the Pastor* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 19.

⁵⁸ Clifford B. Boone, *Puritan Evangelism: Preaching for Conversion in Late-Seventeenth Century English Puritanism* (London: Paternoster, 2013), 3.

⁵⁹ Of the many pastoral concerns that he addresses, Flavel frequently returns to the notion of sympathy in parenting. He argues regularly that the sympathy parents have for their children in all their troubles ought to induce them to earnestly care for their souls, striving to help them understand the necessity of Christ for their salvation. Correspondingly, Bremer makes the point that the Puritans can in no way be accused of lacking care for, and attachment to, their children: "There is no basis for saying that

of life and death should melt the heart to compassion of every dispenser of the gospel.⁶⁰ Elsewhere, he suggests that the compassion of Christ stirs in the bowels of his pastors, leading them to long after the salvation of lost souls.⁶¹ Using metaphors from Scripture, Flavel reminds pastors that the crowds are hungry and the fields ripe for the harvest.⁶² If then the compassion of Christ is truly in his under shepherds, he exhorts ministers to feed the sheep with food and reap the harvest that is before them.⁶³ In his own preaching, Flavel confronts the skeptical and reluctant, answering and resolving objections that would prevent them from coming to Christ.⁶⁴ He consistently appeals to them to consider the compassions of Christ, a Savior who is ready and willing to receive them.⁶⁵

Third, Flavel intends that the shepherds of the flock appeal to the tender, compassionate relationship (or union) of Christ to his people in order to improve the ground of faith for all believers. By improving the ground of faith, he intends to encourage, strengthen and renew believers' trust and rest in Christ.⁶⁶ For example, in

puritans were not emotionally attached to their children. Though they were resigned to the loss of a child, a common experience in this period, they did care deeply about their children." Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 65.

⁶⁰ John Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized, or the Heavenly Use of Earthly Things*, in *Works*, 5:60.

⁶¹ Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:38.

⁶² Thomas Boston uses Christ's illustration of fishing. He develops the compassionate motivation of evangelism in a lengthy discussion, noting first that "Christ had not only the good of souls before his eyes, but he was much affected with their case; it lay heavy on his spirit." Thomas Boston, *The Art of Manfishing* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Heritage, 2006), 85–91.

⁶³ Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:14.

⁶⁴ Beeke captures the tearful sentiments of evangelism and the knowledge of hell in Puritanism, noting that they did not preach "without compassion for the lost. In reading through some of their sermons and writings, one can almost see the tear stains on each page that refers to eternal damnation." Joel R. Beeke and Terry D. Slachter, *Encouragement for Today's Pastors: Help from the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 179.

⁶⁵ Beeke helpfully summarizes five characteristics of Puritan evangelism: thoroughly biblical, unashamedly doctrinal, experimentally practical, holistically evangelistic, and studiously symmetrical. Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 7–50. Given the emphasis of compassion in Flavel and other Puritan authors, another possible characteristic might be that the Puritans were motivated by compassion in their pleading with sinners to come to Christ.

⁶⁶ Fairbairn also acknowledges that compassion is not an end of itself but should rather serve for the maturity of the flock. He notes that a pastor may visit those afflicted, maintaining a sense of

times of great affliction, he appeals to union through familial relations in Christ: “Is he not thy Father, and a father full of compassions, and bowels? And can a father stand by his dying-child, see his fainting fits, hear his melting groans, and pity-begging looks, and not help him, especially having restoratives by him, that can do it?”⁶⁷ For those who have fallen in sin, Flavel assures them of the tenderness of Christ who faithfully extends pardon and forgiveness to all who come to him in faith.⁶⁸ Moreover, he appeals to the mercy of Christ to thwart the schemes of Satan, strategies that intend to convince sinners that there is no hope.⁶⁹ “It is a great artifice of the devil . . . telling them there is no hope of mercy for them; that they shall find the arms of mercy closed, the bowels of compassion shut up.”⁷⁰ By applying the compassion of God found in union with Christ, Flavel intends to strengthen (or improve) the ground of faith, that believers may thereby suitably rest in Christ.

The Tender-Hearted Minister and the Mystical Body of Christ

Flavel speaks of ministers as the chief servants or stewards over the household of God (the church). Appealing to Matthew 24:45–46, he acknowledges that Christ distinguishes ministers from the rest of the flock with respect to their solemn employment and appointment over the family of God.⁷¹ “It is agreed by all, that the words have a

affection and concern, “and still fail miserably in the discharge of duty; never, indeed, rise to any due conception of it.” Patrick Fairbairn, *Pastoral Theology: A Treatise on the Office and Duties of the Christian Pastor* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths, 1992), 301. As Fairbarin suggests, pastors may fail at the discharge of their duty because they may begin to feel—along with those they serve—that their very presence and compassionate words carry an inherent blessing with it, rather than grounding their security in Christ.

⁶⁷ Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:50.

⁶⁸ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:376.

⁶⁹ Many of the Puritans appeal to the covenant and the believer’s union with Christ for grounds of assurance of salvation. See John von Rohr’s remarks on covenant and assurance in English Puritanism. John R Von Rohr, “Covenant and Assurance in Early English Puritanism,” *Church History* 34, no. 2 (June 1965): 195–203.

⁷⁰ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:72.

⁷¹ “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to

special and immediate respect to gospel-ministers, the stewards of Christ's house, or church, to whom Christ . . . or Lord of the family, hath trusted the care and dispensation of the affairs thereof."⁷² Serving as guides of the Lord's sheep, pastors receive special charge over the flock, whom Christ considers with great affection and care.⁷³ In addition to the predominant and overarching description of the dear and intimate mystical union between Christ and the church, Flavel also adds the metaphor of husbandry to describe Christ and the church.⁷⁴ In his understanding, the husbandman purchases his fields, gives valuable consideration to them, and employs his servants to care for them.⁷⁵ "So hath God purchased his church with a full valuable price, even the precious blood of his own Son."⁷⁶ For him, such a price could not speak any higher of God's esteem of his church and the responsibility of ministers as under shepherds.

Because of the inestimable price Christ paid for his body (the church), Flavel reminds pastors of the serious nature and great responsibility laid on them for the care of the sheep. He charges pastors to seek prudence and faithfulness in their calling, lest they "give their people the chaff for the wheat, and stones for bread; who glory in the title, and live upon the profits, but neither feed the flock, nor mind the account."⁷⁷ All shepherds

give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes."

⁷² Flavel, *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor*, in *Works*, 6:565.

⁷³ Baxter emphasizes this point as his third motive to the oversight of the church. "It is the church of God which we must oversee and feed. It is that church that is sanctified by the Holy Spirit, is united to Christ, and is his mystical body." Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. Tim Cooper (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 93.

⁷⁴ See Flavel's exposition of John 17:23, "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:33–48.

⁷⁵ "That the life and employment of an husbandman, excellently shadows forth the relation betwixt God and his church, and the relative duties betwixt its ministers and members. Or more briefly thus: The church is God's husbandry, about which his ministers are employed." Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:17.

⁷⁶ Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:17.

⁷⁷ Flavel, *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor*, in *Works*, 6:581.

will be called to account for their management of God’s house in the “audit-day.” Faithful pastors combat personal deficits in their study of salvation as well as their “coldness” and “dead-heartedness.” These deficits “evidently discover, that both our brains and bowels need more strength and tenderness.”⁷⁸ Flavel’s teaching about the ministerial charge over Christ’s body does not lead faithful pastors to a passive or permissive expression of pastoral compassion. Instead, the tender-hearted minister faithfully manages the house of God by exhorting believers to have a suitable response to Christ’s compassion. This response includes thankful hearts of praise as well as a sympathetic concern with all the interests of the members of Christ’s mystical body.

First, Flavel asserts that believers ought to express frequent thanksgiving and praise to God for all the mercies that he has extended to them. He acknowledges that in Christ are “all the streams of mercy that flow from God to us, and all the returns of praise from us to God.”⁷⁹ He warns against a thankless life, stating, “But truly if thou be a despiser of mercy, thou shalt be a pattern of wrath. God will remember them in fury who forget him in his favours.”⁸⁰ Elsewhere, Flavel prescribes frequent and thankful meditation upon all the mercies flowing from the fountain of Christ.⁸¹ In consideration of God’s good providences, Flavel asserts that it behooves the believer to pursue a life of praise and thanksgiving. These manifold providences are free, undeserved, voluminous, and tender, and they express God’s good nature.⁸² As God’s people acknowledge his mercies with thankfulness, they also recognize that they are not extended compassion singularly for personal gain or profit. Instead, Flavel states, “Honour God with your

⁷⁸ Flavel, *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor*, in *Works*, 6:582.

⁷⁹ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:450.

⁸⁰ John Flavel, *A Caution to Seamen: A Dissuasive Against Several Horrid and Detestable Sins*, in *Works*, 5:324.

⁸¹ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:391.

⁸² Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:448–49.

mercies by clothing the naked and feeding the hungry, especially such as are godly.”⁸³ In this way, thankful returns promote a compassionate spirit in the saints.

Second, Flavel asserts that the people of God share a sympathy with all the other members and concerns of Christ.⁸⁴ He writes, “Those to whom God giveth his Spirit have a tender sympathy with all the interests and concernments of Christ.”⁸⁵ As the members of Christ body are animated by one and the same Spirit, they cannot be but tenderly affected by all the miseries and troubles of the other members. Thus, the people of God are not merely affected sympathetically by the suffering of others generally, but by all the concerns of the household of God. In Flavel’s teaching, this includes the scattering of the sheep in times of persecution. “If his public worship cease, or the assemblies of his people are scattered; it cannot but go to the hearts of all, in whom the Spirit of Christ is.”⁸⁶ Essentially, Flavel argues that the members of Christ’s body express sympathy with the advancement of all of Christ’s interests. This includes a return to Christ and a reformation in the kingdoms and countries of man. Though the afflictions of God’s people may increase, the church may rejoice sympathetically if the Spirit reaps a harvest and the interests of Christ have advanced. Flavel searchingly asks, “Carest thou not which way things go with the people of God, and the gospel of Christ, so long as thine own affairs prosper, and all things are well with thee?”⁸⁷

⁸³ John Flavel, *The Seaman's Companion: Six Sermons on the Mysteries of Providence as Relating to Seamen; and the Sins, Dangers, Duties and Troubles of Seamen*, in *Works*, 5:410.

⁸⁴ Alexander, whom Flavel influenced profoundly, looks to sympathy as a sign for discerning true revival. He captures the pre-modern and pre-psychological notion of sympathy as he underscores its unity or bond. “The causes, already considered, which modify religious experience, relate to Christians as individuals—but man is constitutionally a social being; and religion is a social thing; so that we cannot have a complete view of this subject without considering them as they stand connected with others, and especially as they are influenced by one another. There is a mysterious bond, called sympathy, by which not only human beings, but some species of animals are connected.” Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 32.

⁸⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 3:337.

⁸⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 3:337.

⁸⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:338.

Several pastoral implications follow from Flavel's perspective on Christ's mystical body. First, given the affectionate consideration Christ maintains towards his body, his under shepherds ought to work laboriously for the interests of Christ. This runs parallel to Flavel's remarks concerning Christ, whom he describes as a laborious, painful minister. "He put a necessity on himself to finish his work in his day; a work infinitely great, in a very little time. . . . In this must his ministers resemble him."⁸⁸ If God cherishes his people enough to give his precious Son as payment, the pastors of the sheep must labor diligently. At times, Flavel expands the application to all believers, arguing that if Christ maintained a laborious life, it is necessary that all, who call themselves Christians, labor zealously and actively in all their work.⁸⁹ In Flavel's estimation, there awaits a great reward for the faithful minister who carefully stewards the object of God's compassionate mercy. "O the joyful congratulations that will be in that day between laborious, faithful ministers, and their believing, obedient hearers!"⁹⁰

Second, the perspective of Christ's compassion to his mystical body implies that the pastor is a directive minister. Because Christ cherishes his church, the shepherds strive to direct and counsel believers to greater faith and obedience. For example, Flavel directs the saints to be a forgiving people, for those who have found the compassion of God should be those ready to show it.⁹¹ Additionally, appealing to Isaiah 61:1,⁹² he directs believers to plead often and hard with God in prayer because Christ's commission consisted of seeking the lost and binding up the broken-hearted.⁹³ Elsewhere, he directs

⁸⁸ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:129.

⁸⁹ Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, in *Works*, 1:129.

⁹⁰ Flavel, *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:23.

⁹¹ John Flavel, *Gospel Unity Recommended to the Churches of Christ*, in *Works*, 3:607.

⁹² "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted."

⁹³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:200.

his listeners to refrain from judging God’s character according to their own troubles, doubting God’s compassionate nature. “Never measure the grace of God, nor the mercy of Christ, by the rule of your own narrow conception and apprehensions of him; but believe them to be far greater than your contracted and narrow understanding represents them to you.”⁹⁴ The tender-hearted minister is thus one who does not simply listen to the pains of the sheep, but also continually directs in the life of faith according to the compassion given in Christ.

Third, the doctrine of Christ mystical and compassion implies that the pastor strives to be an affecting minister.⁹⁵ This is not to say that Flavel believed that the pastor’s preaching and work is the effective means by which God transforms the heart of sinners.⁹⁶ He clearly argues against the efficacy of the gifts, abilities, and efforts of earthen vessels and instead explains that the power of regeneration and reconciliation derives from the Spirit of God working through the Word.⁹⁷ As Ryken describes, the affecting pastor took a thoughtful, rational understanding of truth and balanced it with an “appeal to the heart and will. The Puritan sermon was affective: it aimed to affect the listener.”⁹⁸ Flavel believed that a pastor should be one who is transformed, whose

⁹⁴ Flavel, *England’s Duty*, in *Works*, 4:140.

⁹⁵ Beeke concurs, noting that the pastor ought to “woo the heart passionately. Puritan preaching was affectionate, zealous and optimistic. . . . They did not just reason with the mind and confront the conscience; they appealed to the heart.” Joel Beeke, “Learn from the Puritans II,” in *Dear Timothy: Letters on Pastoral Ministry*, ed. Thomas K. Ascol (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2004). This notion is different than simply having a heightened state of emotion as Martin indicates. Albert N. Martin, *The Man of God: His Preaching and Teaching Labors*, vol. 2 (Montville, NJ: Trinity Pulpit Press, 2018), 407. Rather, the minister appeals affectionately to the heart that the hands of the soul might reach for Christ.

⁹⁶ Senkbeil also notes the ineffectual nature of the pastor’s compassion and empathy, noting that the cure of souls is not found in the minister’s compassionate spirit or emotional comprehension of the sufferer. “In those situations human compassion can go just so far; when life caves in, broken and shattered souls need more than human kindness. They need God himself.” Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor’s Heart* (Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2019), 53 and 69.

⁹⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:57–58.

⁹⁸ Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 102.

affections have been changed by God. The prospect of eternal life and death should melt the pastor's "heart into compassion over them, and make him beg hard, and plead earnestly with God for a better issue of the gospel than this upon them."⁹⁹ Flavel employs other descriptions such as wooing, alluring, beseeching, and persuading. The compassion of the pastor provokes him to make heart-felt appeals, seeking not only to proclaim Christ to the unregenerate, but to encourage believers in all facets of their discipleship to apply Christ.

The Tender-Hearted Minister and Pastoral Care

It is not simply that Flavel derives notions of the pastoral office and the tender-hearted minister from his Christological understanding of compassion, but he also applies compassion doctrinally (or Christologically) across a wide variety of pastoral concerns.¹⁰⁰ While Flavel addresses many of these pastoral interests in his expositions of the accomplishment and application of redemption, he directly attends to specific issues in his extensive pastoral literature. For example, these pastoral concerns include (among others) cultivating a steady mind and resigned will amid fear (*A Practical Treatise of Fear*), encouraging the unity of the faith (*Gospel Unity Recommended to the Churches of Christ*), diagnosing hypocrisy (*The Touchstone of Sincerity*), and imparting consolation in times of sorrow (*A Token for Mourners* and *The Balm of the Covenant*). While these pastoral topics apply compassion according to several of these Christological doctrines, Flavel often features one or two prominently in his application of compassion.

Overcoming Fear

In *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, Flavel acknowledges the dangerous wounds

⁹⁹ Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized*, in *Works*, 5:60.

¹⁰⁰ Murphy suggests that the application of the truth of Scripture to the hearts of lives of God's people is the primary and fundamental nature of pastoral theology. Thomas Murphy, *Pastoral Theology: The Pastor in The Various Duties of His Office* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths, 1996), 13.

that fear inflicts upon the mind, cutting away at personal fortitude and leaving believers unserviceable in their Christian duties by focusing on the evils of tomorrow. He intends to encourage and confirm believers for “hard encounters,” that they might have a steady mind and a resigned will, poised and constant in the face of fear in difficult times. Flavel divides his treatise into seven chapters, expounding Isaiah 8:12–14 and addressing topics including the nature, kinds, uses, causes, and effects of fear, as well as prescribing rules for the cure of sinful fear.¹⁰¹ Throughout his treatise, Flavel directs believers’ attention to God for relief. “We live among lions . . . the only reason of our safety is this, that he who is the keeper of the lions, is also the shepherd of the sheep.”¹⁰² In addition, Flavel appeals to the compassion of God for spiritual encouragement, writing, “But were it once thoroughly understood and believed, what power there is in God’s hand to defend us, what tenderness in his bowels to commiserate us . . . O how quiet and calm would our hearts be! Our courage would quickly be up, and our fears down.”¹⁰³

Flavel provides a well-grounded relief for fear in the compassion of God associated with union with Christ. In his epistolary introduction to the treatise, he writes, “If our union with Christ be sure in itself, and sure to us also . . . what well-composed spectators shall we be of these tragedies!”¹⁰⁴ In Flavel’s mind, one of the causes of sinful fear is that believers are ignorant of their relation to God in Christ. If they were to understand how dear they are to him, they would rest secure in his presence.¹⁰⁵ Elsewhere, he acknowledges that believers find sufficient encouragement in their

¹⁰¹ “But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”

¹⁰² John Flavel, *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, in *Works*, 3:267.

¹⁰³ Flavel, *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, in *Works*, 3:258.

¹⁰⁴ Flavel, *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, in *Works*, 3:240.

¹⁰⁵ Flavel, *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, in *Works*, 3:259.

relationship to Christ: “His love to, and tenderness over his people, is transcendent and unparalleled.”¹⁰⁶ At other times, he describes the relationship as that of a tender father who provides fatherly care for his children. Using this analogy, Flavel accentuates the people of God as a treasured object in times of danger.

More specifically, he speaks to the believer’s fear of what God might do. In other words, he confronts the fearful notion that God will providentially afflict or cast off the believer because of his sin. He argues that God will do nothing against the believer’s good. The reason is that God has secured his people to himself through his covenant in Christ. “All your fears of God’s forgetting or forsaking you, spring out of your ignorance of the covenant.”¹⁰⁷ He appeals to several Scriptures to remind believers of their secure and dear relationship with God in Christ, including Isaiah 49:15: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” Flavel argues that a complete understanding of the covenant of God in Christ alleviates fears of God’s judgment or retribution.¹⁰⁸ He appeals to numerous Scriptures to remind believers that the compassionate eyes of God are always on his people.¹⁰⁹

Additionally, he states that a sincere faith produces sympathy with the mystical body of Christ, sometimes leading believers to fear for the troubles, persecutions, and future of the church. He argues that those touched with a feeling sense of the church’s troubles demonstrate a sincere faith, seeing that many seek selfish things rather than the things of Christ. Yet, Flavel appeals to union with Christ for cultivating a composed

¹⁰⁶ Flavel, *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, in *Works*, 3:294.

¹⁰⁷ Flavel, *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, in *Works*, 3:283.

¹⁰⁸ “I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them” (Jer 32:40).

¹⁰⁹ “He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous” (Job 36:7). “For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.” (2 Chron 16:9).

spirit: “You see how good men may be even overwhelmed with public fears; but certainly if we did well consider the bond of the covenant that is betwixt God and his people, we should be more quiet an composed.”¹¹⁰ In this covenant relationship between Christ and his people, Flavel acknowledges the unchangeable nature of Christ’s compassion. He writes, “His pity and mercy is still the same, for that endures forever: his bowels yearn as tenderly over his people in their present, as ever they did any past afflictions or straits.”¹¹¹ In this way, he appeals to the unchangeableness of Christ’s compassion, in the context of the intimate bond between God and his people, to settle fears for the church’s future.

Finding Security

In *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, Flavel acknowledges that the people of God live in evil days. In the light of their need for security and rest, Flavel’s exposition of Isaiah 26:20 instructs the church to “redeem their time with double diligence” and enter the refuge of safety found only in Christ.¹¹² He structures his treatise in twelve chapters that cover the concerns of God’s people that necessitate a refuge, the special care God has over his church and the glorious attributes of God that function as chambers of security for the saints. According to Flavel, the saints “are the people invited to the “chambers of security.” And the form of invitation is full of tender compassion; *Come, my people*; like a tender father who sees a storm coming upon his children in the fields.”¹¹³ While Flavel employs all three doctrines of Christ in his consideration of compassion and the refuge of the righteous, he especially appeals to union with Christ and the special relation the saints have with one another in Christ.

¹¹⁰ Flavel, *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, in *Works*, 3:284.

¹¹¹ Flavel, *A Practical Treatise of Fear*, in *Works*, 3:285.

¹¹² “Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by.”

¹¹³ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:325.

While Flavel exhorts believers to be affected with the miseries and calamities that befall their nation, he places greater emphasis on the need to be affected by spiritual miseries. As members of the mystical body of Christ, who sympathize with all the concerns of Christ, Flavel argues that the saints ought to bewail the fact that Christless souls have no concern for their own salvation. “Pity your own souls, and be deeply affected with the misery of others, the poor Christless world who are like to perish for want of vision.”¹¹⁴ The body of Christ ought also to be moved as its members consider people’s attitude towards the God of compassion. “O who that loves God can refrain tears, to see the God of pity, the God of tender mercies, a Father full of bowels of compassion, so incensed and provoked to indignation!”¹¹⁵ Hence, the sympathy of the body of believers, affected by all the miseries on all the concerns of Christ—including the Lord’s wrathful indignation over national miseries—becomes one context which necessitates a suitable refuge. If they have no concern in these things, then why, asks Flavel, are the saints called upon in Scripture to find security in the chambers of rest?¹¹⁶

In chapter four, Flavel argues that God has a special and peculiar care over the saints. “Is there such strong inclination in the very birds of the air, that they will hazard their own lives to save their young; much more is God solicitous for his people.”¹¹⁷ Flavel appeals to numerous emblems, promises, and instances in Scripture to demonstrate God’s profound compassion for his people. In all of these, he acknowledges the dear relationship believers maintain with God in union with Christ. This does not mean that all of God’s people are preserved from calamity—though they are preserved in the trouble itself. In Flavel’s estimation, God preserves the saints in times of distress, to propagate

¹¹⁴ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:333.

¹¹⁵ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:333.

¹¹⁶ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:330.

¹¹⁷ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:334.

the church, to reward with better seasons the sorrows and sufferings of his people, and to ascribe glory to himself in all his administrations over the world.¹¹⁸

Flavel grounds the notion of God’s special relation with his people again in chapter ten, arguing that the grounds for God’s care for his people includes the “strict and dear relations in which he is pleased to own them. . . . Everyone takes care for his own; much more doth God for his own children.”¹¹⁹ He encourages the sheep to enter in the chamber of security by expounding on the various lovely properties of God’s special care. Those in union with Christ receive a type of compassionate care unknown to the world. First, it is paternal: “And indeed the greatest and tenderest care of an earthly father is but a faint shadow of that tender care which is in the heart of God over his children.”¹²⁰ Second, it is universal, meaning it does not change despite the place, age, and danger of the world. Third, it is continual and preserving: he watches over the saints at all times and in all circumstances. Fourth, it “is exceeding tender, far beyond the tenderness that the most affectionate mother ever felt in her heart towards the child that hanged on her breast.”¹²¹ Fifth, it is seasonable: he seizes the opportune time to provide relief for the church.

In addition to emphasizing God’s special relation with his people, Flavel magnifies the nature of God as one of the primary “chambers of rest” and security for his people.¹²² Accordingly, he underscores how God’s attributes of absolute sovereignty and unsearchable wisdom ground the believer’s trust in God amid troubles. These attributes

¹¹⁸ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:337–38.

¹¹⁹ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 385.

¹²⁰ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:389.

¹²¹ Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:389.

¹²² Flavel’s primary doctrine for this treatise emphasizes God’s attributes: “That the attributes, promises, and providences of God, are the chambers of rest and security, in which his people are to hide themselves, when they foresee the storms of his indignation coming upon the world.” Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:327.

are not disconnected from God's compassion. Rather, "the compassion of God engageth the two fore-mentioned attributes, viz. his power and wisdom for the preservation and relief of his people, as often as distresses befall them."¹²³ It is this interconnectivity between God's attributes that leads Flavel to state that "the infinite tenderness and compassionateness of our God, is a sweet encouragement to resign and commit ourselves and all we have into his hands; his mercy is incomparably tender towards his people."¹²⁴ In Flavel's estimation, a believer's trouble engages all of these attributes for their defense and rescue.

Preserving Unity

Appended to his address of the rise, causes, and remedies of important mental errors that afflict the church, Flavel's sermon on *Gospel Unity* aims to promote the purity and peace of the church. While he admits that necessity brought him into contention with his Christian brothers, he closes his four-part work with an exposition of 1 Corinthians 1:10, to demonstrate his primary desire for unity among the saints.¹²⁵ "It is my grief (the Lord knows) to see the delightful communion the saints once enjoyed, whilst they walked together under the same ordinances of God, now dissolved in such a sad and scandalous degree."¹²⁶ In the sermon, he explicitly argues that unity among believers is not only desirable for the church, but also a duty. Dependent upon the doctrine of union with Christ, he appeals to the moral union that believers have with one another, a relationship knit together in love. "Brotherhood is an endearing thing, and naturally draws affection

¹²³ Flavel, *The Righteous Man's Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:410.

¹²⁴ Flavel, *The Righteous Man's Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:410.

¹²⁵ "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." Flavel previously addresses the issue of antinomianism, though he communicates that his main desire is the peace and unity of the church.

¹²⁶ John Flavel, *The Occasions, Causes, Nature, Rise, Growth and Remedies of Mental Errors*, in *Works*, 3:422.

and unity with it The nearer the relation the stronger the affection.”¹²⁷ He acknowledges that compassion is important for spiritual unity and joint membership in Christ.

Like the apostle Paul, Flavel exhorts the church to pursue unity according to their “bowels of compassion” for one another.¹²⁸ “I passionately and earnestly intreat you . . . by all the bowels of compassion and mercy you have for yourselves, for your brethren, or for the poor carnal world . . . or for me, your minister, whose joy and comfort is bound up in your unity and stability.”¹²⁹ In other words, he acknowledges that believers’ compassion for one another ought to stir them toward unity. On this basis, he encourages believers to reflect upon several motivations that should promote unity. Two relate directly to believers’ compassion and the moral union that exists among them.

First, Flavel suggests that believers’ “bowels of compassion” should cause them to consider how their quarrels lead to common, imminent danger. In other words, they ought to have mercy on one another by not exposing the church to external threats through division. He illustrates this point by describing a flood, wherein various types of animals (typically inharmonious) stand still together without injury on the boroughs in order to preserve themselves. He writes, “It is pity that sense should do more with beasts than reason and religion with men.”¹³⁰ Second, he asks believers to not only reflect on how their divisions injure those within the body of Christ, but those outside the body. Such quarrels harden and prejudice unbelievers against Christianity. He goes on to state, “If you have no pity for yourselves, pity perishing souls, and pity your poor discouraged

¹²⁷ Flavel, *Gospel Unity*, in *Works*, 3:593.

¹²⁸ “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil. 2:1–2) Flavel appeals to the translation “any affection and sympathy” as “any bowels of mercy.”

¹²⁹ Flavel, *Gospel Unity*, in *Works*, 3:598.

¹³⁰ Flavel, *Gospel Unity*, in *Works*, 3:600.

ministers.”¹³¹ In this way, Flavel appeals to the doctrine of the moral union of Christ’s body as the basis for showing compassion to those outside the household of faith. In sum, because the consequences of Christian division are injurious to the body of Christ and to the cause of Christ, he encourages unity among believers according to “any bowels of compassion” that are in Christ.

Discerning Providence

Flavel’s treatise on divine providence is arguably one of his greatest works. Ferguson writes that, among the writings of Flavel, none speaks with more power than *Divine Conduct*: “It stands out for its insightful, biblical and pastorally-sensitive realism. Here is truly a Puritan and spiritual classic.”¹³² Beginning with an exposition of Psalm 57:2, he structures his theology of providence around five general heads, concluding with several pertinent applications.¹³³ Acknowledging the value and glory of God’s works and their accomplishment of the glorious medium of the written Word, Flavel argues that it is a great pleasure to discern God’s providence. “But to record and note its particular designs upon ourselves; with what profound wisdom, infinite tenderness, and incessant vigilancy it hath managed all that concerns us from first to last is ravishing and transporting.”¹³⁴ Given these considerations, he intends to provide the pattern and rules to direct his readers in the work of providential reflection. With respect to God’s tender and compassionate care in his providences, he especially utilizes the doctrine of union with Christ to encourage his readers to reflect thoughtfully on God’s gracious works.

Flavel first works compassion into his doctrine of divine providence by

¹³¹ Flavel, *Gospel Unity*, in *Works*, 3:601.

¹³² Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Some Pastors and Teachers* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2017), 309.

¹³³ “I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.”

¹³⁴ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:340.

explaining the compassionate nature of God, couched in the context of Psalm 57:1, “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge.” He argues that there is a dependence upon God grounded not only in his promises, but also in his nature. “This his trust and dependence on God, though it be not argumentative in respect of the dignity of the *act*; yet it is so in respect both of the nature of the *object*, a compassionate God, who will not expose any that take shelter under his wings.”¹³⁵ While his exposition of the Psalm generally treats of the nature of God, he elsewhere notes specifically the mercies of God found in Christ. He acknowledges that due observation of providence will endear Christ to our souls.¹³⁶ “Christ is the channel of grace and mercy; through him are all the *decursus et recursus gratarum*, all the streams of mercy that flow from God to us, and all the returns of praise from us to God.”¹³⁷ In this way, he encourages the saints to thoroughly and thoughtfully meditate on God’s providence that they might know and love the person of Christ to a greater degree.

Though Flavel does remind his readers of the compassionate nature of God, he predominately urges them to reflect on the providential tender care of God for the saints or those in union with Christ. He provides a twofold consideration of God’s providence: his general providence over his creation and his special and peculiar providence over the church. “The head of the whole world by way of dominion; but an head to the church by way of union and special influence. . . . The church is his special care and charge; he rules the world for her good, as an head consulting the welfare of the body.”¹³⁸ There is an eminent favor of God upon the saints. The tenderness of his providence for his people

¹³⁵ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:344.

¹³⁶ Deckard shows how Flavel’s understanding of God’s providence might be applied pastorally. He remarks that while people may feel alone, they are not alone, especially in the realization that God is always at work in his providence. Mark A. Deckard, *Helpful Truth in Past Places: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Counseling* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 26.

¹³⁷ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:450.

¹³⁸ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:350.

reveals his esteem for them.¹³⁹ Flavel encourages believers to reflect not only upon God’s providence in how the affairs of the world are conducted, but upon the remarkable performances of his providential works for his people in the world.¹⁴⁰ While he labels all of God’s providence (even afflictive) towards the saints as “merciful,” there are several performances or occasions wherein he speaks more directly concerning providential compassion towards his special charge of the church.

First, Flavel urges the saints to meditate on the families in which he placed them. He argues that this placement includes numerous providential mercies such as parental prayers, careful discipline, doctrinal instruction, and patterns of holiness. He writes, “O it is no common mercy to descend from pious parents!”¹⁴¹ Answering the objection of those who have not had heaven-ward help from their families, Flavel calls the saints to admire the mercy of God despite having little parental assistance.¹⁴² This leads Flavel to press parents to consider their sympathy (parental grief in all troubles) for their children, acknowledging “the consideration of the great day, should move your bowels of pity for them.”¹⁴³

Second, Flavel encourages believers to reflect on the occasions, instruments, and means of their conversion, for there is no more glorious providence given to the saints. While God’s providential mercies are diverse, “among them all, this is the chiefest, to lead and direct them to Christ.”¹⁴⁴ Why does he consider these providences to be great mercies? First, referencing Ephesians 1:19–20, the mercies of conversion come through

¹³⁹ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:412.

¹⁴⁰ Flavel describes the former in the first general heading and the latter in the second general heading.

¹⁴¹ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:371.

¹⁴² Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:373.

¹⁴³ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:375.

¹⁴⁴ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:387.

the greatest of challenges.¹⁴⁵ Second, the mercies of conversion exceed in dignity all others because of its great worth. Third, these mercies flow from God's election, given only to those whom he has elected from all eternity. Fourth, conversion "is a mercy that infallibly secures salvation."¹⁴⁶ Last, the mercies of conversion are eternal. While all temporal things change and pass away, these mercies remain through all ages. In sum, Flavel argues that mercies in conversion can in no way be effected through ministers or angels, but only through the merciful providences by which God sets the believer in the way of salvation.

Third, he urges those who are united to Christ to reflect carefully on God's tenderness in the care of their physical bodies. He writes that God's providence over his people "hath been no less careful for your bodies, and with how great tenderness it hath carried them in its arms through innumerable hazards and dangers also."¹⁴⁷ Flavel asks his readers to consider the numerous hazards, calamities, and diseases through which God has providentially preserved his people. He goes on to argue that God's tender care extends to every member of our bodies, members that have been instruments of sin against God. "You have often provoked him to afflict you in every part, and lay penal evil upon every member that hath been instrumental in moral evil; but oh, how great have his compassions been towards you, and his patience admirable!"¹⁴⁸ In all this, Flavel suggests that God's compassionate care over our bodies is not for our personal comfort. Rather, as part of Christ's purchase, he tenderly preserves the bodies of his saints that they might ably and cheerfully employ them for his purposes.

¹⁴⁵ "And what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand."

¹⁴⁶ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:387.

¹⁴⁷ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:402.

¹⁴⁸ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:404–05.

Aside from these special performances (or occasions) of God's providence, Flavel also addresses the challenge of afflictive providences from the perspective of God's tenderness and mercy in union with Christ. For example, he argues that the saints ought to first set their experience of the spiritual mercy and compassion of Christ before any questioning of God.¹⁴⁹ "Hath he taken some? He might have taken all. Are we afflicted? It is a mercy we are not destroyed. O! if we consider what temporal mercies are yet spared, and what spiritual mercies are bestowed, and yet continued to us, we shall find cause to admire mercy rather than complain of severity."¹⁵⁰ Second, given any sad or afflictive providences, the household of faith ought to have compassion and pity on the world for the miseries that come as a result of sin.¹⁵¹ Flavel acknowledges that it is right and seasonable for the church to exercise sorrow over the things that provoke God's anger. Third, because Christ has a tender sense of his body's burdens and afflictions, believers ought to maintain a life of thanksgiving and praise amid difficult providences.¹⁵² Considering the bowels of compassion and tenderness of Christ leads him to feel our pains "as if the apple of his eye were touched . . . All these are so many bands clapt by providence upon the soul to oblige it to a life of praise."¹⁵³ In these ways, Flavel applies God's compassion to afflictive providences in the theological context of union with Christ.

¹⁴⁹ In their explanation of Flavel's *Divine Conduct*, Gleason and Kopic note that painful providences may indeed be expressions of God's love, specially designed for our good. Kelly M. Kopic and Randall C. Gleason, eds., *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 221.

¹⁵⁰ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:427.

¹⁵¹ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:428.

¹⁵² Deckard captures Flavel's pastoral ends noting that the goal of counseling is not to remove suffering, but to grow in Christ-likeness in the midst of suffering. Mark A. Deckard, *Helpful Truth in Past Places: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Counseling* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 19.

¹⁵³ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:449–50.

Enduring Tribulation

Given the persecution of the church in his day and the great temptations to forsake the foundations of a biblical profession, Flavel penned *Antipharmacum Saluberrimum (or A Serious and Seasonable Caveat to all the Saints in the Hour of Temptation)* to prevent those who profess faith in Christ from “betraying truth” and “forsaking the camp of Christ.” He writes, “For I cannot without trembling observe, how many forward professors begin to give ground already and fall into a compliance with antichristian abominations.”¹⁵⁴ He offers eight specific counsels to thwart the schemes of Satan and preserve the soul in the hour of temptation. In counsel seven, Flavel seeks to strengthen believers according to the compassion they have for one another as members of Christ’s body.

One of Flavel’s preserving counsels in the hour of temptation suggests maintaining a deep affectedness with the trouble of the church. In his mind, the people of God ought to have a similar disposition with the rest of the body. He writes, “Get your hearts deeply affected with Zion’s misery, and strive earnestly with the Lord on its behalf. . . . The pouring out of this spirit of compassion will be a token for good to us.”¹⁵⁵ Appealing to numerous Scriptures, including Amos 6:6–7, he warns that the neglect of a compassionate spirit towards the miseries of the body of Christ not only strives against God but also provokes his judgment.¹⁵⁶ “Have we not heard of the anguish of Zion, and sore distress upon many of her children at this day, and yet have not been so tenderly touched with the due sense of it? Oh write that man bowless, that hath no compassion

¹⁵⁴ Flavel, *Antipharmacum Saluberrimum*, in *Works*, 4:516.

¹⁵⁵ Flavel, *Antipharmacum Saluberrimum*, in *Works*, 4:550.

¹⁵⁶ “Who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first of those who go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away.” See also Psalm 137:5, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!”

in his spirit now for Zion.”¹⁵⁷ Instead, he calls believers to mourn over the suffering of the church which unites the strength of God’s people and importunately intercedes for God’s mercy upon the church. Those who mind the troubles of the church fortify their souls in moments of great temptation.

Flavel connects this exhortation pertaining to the body of Christ with the tender-hearted nature of God and the special relation the church maintains with God in Christ. First, he urges believers to have compassion and prayerful importunity on the miseries of the church because of the gracious nature of God. “Oh remember you lie down at the feet of a tender-hearted Father, willing to be overcome by you.”¹⁵⁸ Appealing to Luke 18:7, he insists that a Father, whose compassions and tender affections are greater than all the parents of the world, will not shut the “bowels of mercy” from his own children.¹⁵⁹ While not specifically referencing union with Christ, he does describe the church as that which “lies near his heart,” “dear to God,” and “the interest of his Son” to indicate the special relation the church maintains with God in Christ. Flavel concludes by stating that a sympathy which shares in the misery of the church also shares the joy when the Lord restores her fortunes.

Keeping the Heart

Embry suggests that one of the primary reasons for Flavel’s popularity rests in his great skill as a physician of the heart.¹⁶⁰ Lamenting the scandalous practices of some in his day, Flavel composed *A Saint Indeed (or The Great Work of a Christian)* in order to

¹⁵⁷ Flavel, *Antipharmacum Saluberrimum*, in *Works*, 4:551.

¹⁵⁸ Flavel, *Antipharmacum Saluberrimum*, in *Works*, 4:551.

¹⁵⁹ “And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?”

¹⁶⁰ Adam Embry, *An Honest and Well-Experienced Heart: The Piety of John Flavel* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 15.

provide believers with the necessary tools to keep (or watch) their hearts.¹⁶¹ He suggests that it is not only important for believers to guard their hearts so that they do not fall into corruption, but also that their immoral examples do not “make fast the bonds of death” upon atheists and hypocrites.¹⁶² In order to promote the visible reformation of true professors of Christianity, Flavel structures his treatise around four primary topics that develop a theology of the heart from Proverbs 4:23.¹⁶³ He argues specifically “that the keeping and right managing of the heart in every condition, is the great business of a Christian’s life.”¹⁶⁴ While Flavel appeals to God’s tender nature occasionally in this treatise, his primary considerations of compassion with respect to keeping the heart revolve around his understanding of union with Christ and the union of the saints as Christ’s body.¹⁶⁵

Flavel suggests that the saints’ sympathetic compassion for the church gives rise to an occasion (or season) to keep the heart. “When the church, like the ship in which Christ and his disciples were, is oppressed, and ready to perish in the waves of persecution; then good souls are ready to sink, and be shipwrecked too, upon the billows of their own fears.”¹⁶⁶ While Flavel holds that the saints ought to have a mournful sympathy with the miseries of the church, he urges believers not to be “self-tormentors,”

¹⁶¹ The treatise has often been republished under the title *Keeping the Heart*.

¹⁶² John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed, or The Great Work of a Christian Explained and Applied*, in *Works* 5:418. Packer explains that watching or keeping the heart is the most basic Christian discipline. Packer understands the practice to be “admonitory meditation, that is, the deployment within one’s own mind of key lines of thought that will confirm and reinforce the various aspects of faithful communion with God, and recall us to Him in renewed loyalty when we have slipped away, or been drawn away, from the path of faithfulness.” J. I. Packer, *Puritan Portraits: J. I. Packer on Selected Classic Pastors and Pastoral Classics* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012), 93.

¹⁶³ “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”

¹⁶⁴ Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:425.

¹⁶⁵ For example, Flavel calls believers to consider God’s nature in seasons of affliction. To guard the heart, he calls the believer to “the very consideration of his nature, a God of love, pity, and tender mercies.” Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:442.

¹⁶⁶ Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:445.

issuing several directions to establish the heart in these times. Among these directions, Flavel surprisingly encourages the church to find comfort in their sympathy with the troubles of the body. “Surely this trouble of yours is a good argument of your integrity; union is the ground of sympathy.”¹⁶⁷ In addition to encouraging their sincerity of faith by their sympathy, he exhorts believers to compare their compassionate frame with the church to that of Christ. Flavel writes, “If you be sensible of the church’s troubles, Jesus Christ is much more sensible of, and solicitous about it, than you can be.”¹⁶⁸ The knowledge of Christ’s deep compassion for his church should guard our hearts, for we know that he will have favor upon his people and those who mourn for them.

While Flavel appeals to God’s special relation with the body of Christ throughout this treatise, he argues specifically that believers ought to consider their special status, to guard their hearts in times of great need or want. How might the Christian guard his heart from distrusting God in such times? Among numerous considerations, Flavel urges believers to remember their status as children of God. “Doth it become the children of such a Father to distrust his all-sufficiency, or repine at any of his dispensations.”¹⁶⁹ Appealing to Psalm 103:13, James 5:11, and Job 38:41, Flavel argues that God is exceedingly pitiful and tenderly merciful to his children.¹⁷⁰ In Flavel’s mind, if the Lord clothes his enemies, he will certainly not forget his children. In this

¹⁶⁷ Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:450.

¹⁶⁸ Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:450. John Galpine applies this notion to the church following the death of Flavel, lamenting the loss of Flavel’s immense service to the church. He states, “though the servants, even the best of them die, yet the Master ever lives, who is infinitely more tender of the concerns of his Church, and careful to provide for it, than we poor mortals can be.” John Galpine, “The Life of Mr. John Flavell,” in *Mr. John Flavell’s Remains: Being Two Sermons, Composed by That Reverend and Learned Divine* (London, 1691), 16.

¹⁶⁹ Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:461.

¹⁷⁰ “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him” (Psalm 103:13). “Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11). “Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God for help, and wander about for lack of food?” (Job 38:41).

way, Flavel urges believers to reason with themselves, cautioning them against making a false charge against God—that he either does not care or that he does not know their need. God’s special relation to them in Christ functions as a powerful medicine against the deceit of the heart in times of want.

Diagnosing Hypocrisy

Because many professors of religion have not adequately examined their hearts with respect to the sincerity of their faith, Flavel underscores the necessity of a serious and sober preparation and reflection before their dying hour. Noting that it is of the greatest importance to discern the “signs of grace” in God’s Word and the “works of grace” in the soul, Flavel wrote *The Touchstone of Sincerity* (or *The Signs of Grace and Symptoms of Hypocrisy*) “to bring everyman’s gold to the touchstone and fire.”¹⁷¹ Beginning with a brief exposition of Revelation 3:17–18, Flavel explains three doctrines to help professors discern true grace from hypocrisy.¹⁷² He believes that many who profess faith in Christ are mistaken in their profession, having not obtained the precious true grace found only in union with Christ. Among the various directions, Flavel appeals to the compassion believers ought to have for the mystical body of Christ in discerning the state of the soul.

Flavel argues that prosperity uncovers many sad symptoms of a hypocritical heart. While it reveals a heart oblivious to God and consumed by earthly things, it also points to a lack of concern for Christ’s body. “A false pretender to religion, and hypocritical professor, meeting with prosperity and success, grows altogether unconcerned about that interest of religion, and senseless of the calamities of God’s

¹⁷¹ Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity*, in *Works*, 5:511.

¹⁷² “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.”

people.”¹⁷³ Referencing Old Testament saints who put themselves in danger though they were safe in prosperity and abundance, Flavel argues that a mark of grace is that members of Christ’s body sympathize with each other.¹⁷⁴ “Nor indeed can any gracious heart be unconcerned and senseless; for that union that all the saints have with Christ their head, and with one another, as fellow-members in Christ, will beget sympathy among them in their sufferings.”¹⁷⁵ The hearts of believers, argues Flavel, maintain a sympathetic compassion for the body of Christ because of their identification with one another.

Experiencing Comfort

While he addresses the great miseries and afflictions of the saints throughout his works, Flavel directly addresses sorrow and grief in *A Token for Mourners* (or *The Advice of Christ to a Distressed Mother*) and *The Balm of the Covenant Applied to the Bleeding Wounds of Afflicted Saints*.¹⁷⁶ In the first treatise, he writes to a mother regarding the loss of her child, and expounds Luke 7:18 for her consolation and direction.¹⁷⁷ In the second treatise, he applies his understanding of the everlasting covenant to Ursula Upton upon the loss of her husband, John.¹⁷⁸ In *A Token for*

¹⁷³ Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity*, in *Works*, 5:540–41.

¹⁷⁴ Flavel references both Moses and Nehemiah. “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian” (Acts 7:23–24). “In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, ‘Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.’ Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, ‘Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?’” (Nehemiah 2:1–3).

¹⁷⁵ Flavel, *The Touchstone of Sincerity*, in *Works*, 5:541.

¹⁷⁶ This emphasis on pastoral compassion in times of sorrow is also found in early Reformation writers. See Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 289–98.

¹⁷⁷ “And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’”

¹⁷⁸ Flavel’s funeral sermon for John Upton is based on 2 Chronicles 35:24–25. “So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in his second chariot and brought him to Jerusalem. And he

Mourners, Flavel’s pastoral compassion is rooted in the nature of Christ. In *The Balm of the Covenant*, he appeals specifically to the special relation believers have with God in union with Christ.

In addressing this grieved mother, he recounts the compassion that Christ had for a sorrowful mother whose only son had died.¹⁷⁹ He writes, “The lamentations and wailings of this distressed mother, move the tender compassions of the Lord in beholding them, and stirred up more pity in his heart for her, than could be in her heart for her dear and only son.”¹⁸⁰ Flavel acknowledges that Christ’s compassion was his motive to relieve, comfort, and counsel this sorrowful woman. Even though Christ bore such infirmities “in the days of his flesh,” he continues to be merciful in heaven, “as apt to be touched with the sense of our miseries.” Appealing to Hebrews 4:15, he acknowledges that Christ still has compassion towards his grieving saints, though he be in heaven.¹⁸¹

Christ’s compassionate care exceeds that of parents for their children (exhibited in their tremendous sorrow for their loss). This realization leads Flavel as he counsels grieving parents. While tears are not condemnable or prohibited, he maintains that Christ “prohibits the excesses, and extravagancies of our sorrows for the dead, that it should not be such a mourning for the dead as is found among the heathen . . . because

died and was buried in the tombs of his fathers. All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah. Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah; and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a rule in Israel; behold, they are written in the Laments.”

¹⁷⁹ Flavel begins this brief work with a letter that communicates a disposition of burden bearing or sympathetic sharing of suffering. Martin describes a similar practical pastoral sympathy, maintaining an appropriate, corresponding disposition to those who have hurts and pains. “If we are to deal with battered, bruised, and twisted men and women, there is no place for clinical objectivity and detached professionalism in our relationship to them. This is so because the hurts and pains of God’s people must become our hurts and pains.” Albert N. Martin, *The Man of God: His Shepherding, Evangelizing, and Counseling Labors*, vol. 3 (Montville, NJ: Trinity Pulpit Press, 2020), 26.

¹⁸⁰ John Flavel, *A Token for Mourners*, in *Works*, 5:608.

¹⁸¹ “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

without hope, being ignorant of that grand relief.”¹⁸² Flavel warns against a “comely expression of grief” that would move the mourner against God. “There is no sin in complaining to God, but much wickedness in complaining of him.”¹⁸³ Instead, he leads the grieving to prayer that acknowledges how God’s compassions “far exceed creature-compassion,” even as the sea exceeds a drop of water. In this way, Flavel provides balanced counsel based on the compassionate nature of Christ. He is touched by a sense of our miseries, and we can trust him in our sorrow, knowing that his compassion exceeds our own.

Beginning with an exposition of 2 Samuel 13:5, Flavel provides several consolations to afflicted saints based on the compassion of God in covenant (or special relation) with his people.¹⁸⁴ First, he asserts that afflictions are good for the saints as the Lord pairs his compassion (or rolls it together) with affliction that leads to sanctification. Alluding to Ephraim in Jeremiah 31:19-20, Flavel explains that the disciplines of affliction move the people of God to their knees, fueling their affections for service to God. Likewise, their suffering provokes God’s “bowels of mercy” over them. He writes, “Ephraim mourns at God’s feet, and God falls upon Ephraim’s neck.”¹⁸⁵ These afflictions then produce sanctified fruits as well as demonstrate God’s compassionate care for his people in his restorative purposes for those in covenant with him.

Second, the covenant assures believers of God’s presence in all their troubles. “As the covenant sorts and ranks all your troubles into their proper classes and places of service, so it secures the special, gracious presence of God with you in the deepest

¹⁸² Flavel, *A Token for Mourners*, in *Works*, 5:610.

¹⁸³ Flavel, *A Token for Mourners*, in *Works*, 5:614.

¹⁸⁴ “For does not my house stand so with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. For will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?”

¹⁸⁵ John Flavel, *The Balm of the Covenant Applied to the Bleeding Wounds of Afflicted Saints*, in *Works*, 6:99. Flavel adds, “An unsanctified rod never did any man good, and a sanctified rod never did any man hurt.” Flavel, *The Balm of the Covenant*, in *Works*, 6:98.

plunges of distress that can befall you.”¹⁸⁶ This presence is no small trifle in Flavel’s estimation. He maintains that those in covenant with God have a tender Father who will not leave their sickbed. Quoting Jeremiah 32:40, he assures the saints of their Father’s presence, eternally showing them good.¹⁸⁷ “As a tender father sits up himself with his sick child, and will not leave him to care of a servant only . . . but will be with them himself, and that in a special and peculiar way.”¹⁸⁸ This tender, compassionate presence secures the believer in all afflictions and sorrows.

Third, believers who seek another source of relief in times of affliction neglect God and drink from broken cisterns which cannot hold water.¹⁸⁹ “The best creature is but a cistern, not a fountain,” says Flavel. Those who do not have an interest in Christ will not seek relief in him. They can find no consolation in him because they do not possess him. Instead, he reminds the saints that they have come to the fountain of compassion. “Our compassionate Saviour, to assuage our sorrows, hath promised *he will not leave us comfortless*.”¹⁹⁰ In his estimation, the hand that gives the rod of affliction is the one that must bring healing. All other comforts and consolations are ineffectual. While he notes that some people seek the rules of philosophy to remedy their sorrow, the burdened soul must have his affections regulated, finding peace in the promise that God has made with his people in Christ.

¹⁸⁶ Flavel, *The Balm of the Covenant*, in *Works*, 6:101.

¹⁸⁷ “I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of men in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.”

¹⁸⁸ Flavel, *The Balm of the Covenant*, in *Works*, 6:101.

¹⁸⁹ Flavel quotes Jeremiah 2:13, “For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

¹⁹⁰ Flavel, *The Balm of the Covenant*, in *Works*, 6:94.

Anticipating Suffering

In *Preparations for Sufferings* (or *The Best Work in the Worst Times*), Flavel acknowledges the inevitability of suffering for those who follow Christ. Admitting “the singular advantage of a prepared and ready soul,” the treatise provides direction and help to make suitable preparation for evil and suffering.¹⁹¹ Expositing the apostle Paul’s statements in Acts 21:13, Flavel writes twelve chapters to guide believers towards a readiness for Christian affliction.¹⁹² His main argument is that “it is a blessed and excellent thing for the people of God to be prepared, and ready for the hardest services, and worst of sufferings, to which the Lord may call them.”¹⁹³ In chapter two, Flavel discusses the compassionate nature of Christ in order to prepare believers with the necessary mental framework to explain the seeming contradiction between God’s kindness and the saints’ affliction.

In accord with Psalm 103:13, Flavel admits that the compassion of God is exceedingly great.¹⁹⁴ Citing Lamentations 3:33, he acknowledges the apparent conflict between God’s compassion and his judgment: “For he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.” He goes on to quote Hosea 11:8-9 to further demonstrate the tension, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?” In order to prepare the heart for coming suffering, he reconciles God’s compassionate nature and his afflictive judgment in three ways.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings*, in *Works*, 6:4.

¹⁹² “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

¹⁹³ Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings*, in *Works*, 6:6.

¹⁹⁴ “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.”

¹⁹⁵ Howe asserts that sufferings are preparatory. He addresses a different aspect of the compassion of Christ in a funeral address, asserting that Christ’s compassion is truly real (though not his principal design) despite the extension of divine relief. In his estimation, it is easier to see compassion when physical relief and restoration are given to our physical bodies. Yet, this is only a delay in death. Sufferings are preparatory in order that God’s people might be prepared to receive the compassionate mercy of being taken home to be with Christ at the moment of death. John Howe, *A Funeral Sermon for*

First, Flavel draws a distinction between God’s “strange” work of judgment and his mercy. There is a reluctance to perform this strange work, but a readiness to show compassion. Second, he suggests that God delays his judgment until he can permit it no longer. “Hence we find, when he is preparing to execute his judgments, that he delays the execution as long as the honour of his name and safety of his people will permit.”¹⁹⁶ He goes so far as to note that God first employs lesser and more gentle corrections to turn his wrath from sinners. Third, appealing to Jeremiah 31:17,¹⁹⁷ Flavel notes that the humbling of God’s people in judgment and affliction quickly brings his compassion to them. “When his people are humbled under the threatenings of his wrath, his heart is melted unto compassion to them.”¹⁹⁸ In this way, God’s judgments and afflictions are restorative, revealing the compassionate nature of God in Christ.

Conclusion

Given the centrality of Christ to his theology, it is understandable that Flavel’s concept of the pastoral office and his application of pastoral care flow from his Christology. Flavel’s pastoral care emphasizes compassion because it arises from an exposition and application of the tender-hearted minister himself. He urges ministers to have the same compassionate spirit as Christ, going so far as to suggest it serves as a fitting test for true pastors. Furthermore, Flavel’s threefold Christological pattern provides form (or shape) to his pastoral theology. The compassionate nature of Christ serves as a fitting pattern (or example) for ministers while the mercies found in union with Christ provide the core of their commission of mercy. Pastors also have a

Mrs. Esther Sampson the Late Wife of Henry Sampson, Dr. of Physick (London, 1690), 12.

¹⁹⁶ Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings*, in *Works*, 6:7

¹⁹⁷ “There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country.”

¹⁹⁸ Flavel, *Preparations for Sufferings*, in *Works*, 6:7.

responsibility to those in union with Christ, charging them to exercise compassion as members of Christ's body.

Flavel's Christological focus and his understanding of compassion demonstrate a diverse set of pastoral applications. Applied to a host of pastoral concerns, Flavel urges believers to renew their understanding of the compassionate nature of Christ to prepare their souls for suffering, as well as to fortify their minds in times of fear and sorrow. Flavel also frequently reminds the saints of their special relation to God—the mercies and sympathy found in union with Christ—encouraging them regarding the preservation of their salvation, the purpose of God's afflictive providences, and the consolation found in covenant communion with Christ. Flavel also calls believers to reflect on their own sympathy with the body of Christ, revealing evidences of a true profession and encouraging them to watch their hearts. Because Christ mystical is precious and invaluable, Flavel does not apply compassion indiscriminately. Rather, he strives to mature the church into Christ-likeness according to the duties (or demands) of compassion for the body and the compassionate realities found in Christ.

CHAPTER 6
TOWARD A RENEWED VISION OF PASTORAL
COMPASSION IN UNION WITH CHRIST

Considering it the most excellent and necessary doctrine, Flavel places Christology at the center of all his ministerial labors. Furthermore, he frequently speaks of compassion (in its various senses) throughout his works, demonstrating that it occupies a prominent place in his pastoral care. He does not apply compassion generally but relates it specifically to (1) the person of Christ, (2) the body of Christ, and (3) the believer's union with Christ. For Flavel, "the mercies and compassions of God are all in Christ."¹ Moreover, his emphasis on these three doctrines demonstrates the necessity of a complete Christology for the conceptualization and application of compassion in pastoral ministry. It is critical to hold all three doctrines symphonically for a comprehensive understanding of compassionate pastoral care.

Maintaining a coherent and complete theological vision of compassion for pastoral care helps to avoid what Sweeting labels "lopsided theology," that is, the temptation to emphasize one doctrine at the expense of others.² Contemporary pastoral theology often neglects union with Christ as the doctrinal grounding point for compassionate pastoral care. For Flavel, pastoral theology that does not root its concept of compassion in union with Christ is incomplete and, therefore inadequate. Positively stated, pastoral theology must embrace union with Christ to maintain a biblical vision of

¹ John Flavel, *The Method of Grace in Gospel Redemption*, 2:136.

² Donald W. Sweeting, "Forward," in *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2017), xi–xii. Lints suggests a theological method for developing a theological vision, including an accurate understanding of one's contemporary context. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

compassion. Before pivoting to such a vision, given the empathy-centered focus of contemporary notions of compassion and the influence they exert on the exercise of soul care, it is important to understand the challenges that arise from common empathy-centered approaches to pastoral theology as well as the reasons for the widespread neglect of the doctrine of union with Christ in the formulation of pastoral compassion.

Empathy-Centered Notions of Compassion

Many modern concepts of compassion are shaped by empathy-centered notions including empathy-based ethics, empathy-driven psychology, and empathy-accommodated theology.

Empathy-based Ethics

According to Trueman, “empathy-based ethics” (or “aesthetic-based logic”) places the “priority” on “sympathy and empathy, emotional responses to suffering and to identifying with others, as the foundations of ethical thinking.”³ In other words, an underlying societal philosophy of ethics considers the sentiments to be the guide for what is morally normative. Compassion, pity, empathy, or sympathy become the grounds (or foundation) for morality. In this way, emotional preference and aesthetic sense give shape to morality.

The roots of this philosophy of ethics are found in various Enlightenment thinkers including Adam Smith, David Hume, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁴ While there

³ Trueman builds upon the ideas and work of Alasdair MacIntyre, who claims that “modern ethical discourse has broken down because it rests ultimately on incommensurable narratives and that claims to moral truth are really expressions of emotional preference.” Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 26. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁴ Related works: Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Ryan Patrick Hanley (New York: Penguin Classics, 2010). David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. J. B. Schneewind (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin Classics, 1953). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses*

are differences in their theories, these men share a common framework for understanding the relationship between sentimentalism and moral judgment. Sayre-McCord argues that the sentiments (especially as understood by Smith and Hume) are the “capacity to approve (or disapprove) of actions, motives, and characters as moral or not and, because of that, the capacity to judge actions, motives, and characters as moral or not.”⁵ Adam Smith notes, “To approve of the passions of another . . . as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them.”⁶ Likewise, Hume asserts that we judge something to be good based on our feelings of approval or disapproval of it.⁷

The sentimentalists “took for their starting-point the individual man and his characteristics, as self-evident first principles,” expressing a great deal of faith in human nature as the basis for moral judgment.⁸ Along on this idea, Norman Fiering identifies the eighteenth-century belief in “irresistible compassion”—the notion that man has in his nature, implanted by God, a predisposition toward compassion, finding himself compelled to alleviate human misery. Irresistibly moved to alleviate suffering, “a person who is unmoved by the pains and joys of others is a kind of monster, an unnatural creation, and that God has given men and women inborn feelings of compassion, sympathy, and benevolence as a way of directly guiding mankind to virtue, this opinion

and Other Early Political Writings, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁵ Eric Schliesser, ed., *Sympathy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 210.

⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Ryan Patrick Hanley, Anniversary edition (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2010), 22.

⁷ Remy Debes, “Recasting Scottish Sentimentalism: The Peculiarity of Moral Approval,” *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (March 2012): 93.

⁸ Glenn R. Morrow, “The Significance of the Doctrine of Sympathy in Hume and Adam Smith,” *The Philosophical Review* 32, no. 1 (1923): 60.

became a virtual philosophical and psychological dogma.”⁹ Yet, this growing belief in the innate goodness of man had to overcome numerous challenges, including the reality of man’s viciousness and the teaching of traditional Christian doctrines such as divine judgment and eternal condemnation.¹⁰ As a result, as Hanley states,

On the whole, eighteenth-century epistemology tended to separate sympathy from theism, and indeed to present sympathy as a substitute for a *caritas* whose theistic foundations were increasingly regarded as epistemically unavailable; in this sense, sympathy sought to take us straight to neighbor love without becoming waylaid by the necessity of a lexically prior love of God.¹¹

In sum, lacking the proper divine grounding for morality, these philosophers increasingly appealed to sympathetic compassion for one’s fellow man as the grounds for moral judgment.

In the contemporary marketplace of ideas, empathy-based ethics not only permeates the academic disciplines, but it is severed entirely from any theistic or transcendent notions of morality.¹² Trueman states several characteristics of

⁹ Norman S. Fiering, “Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 2 (1976): 204–05.

¹⁰ Davies discussion on eternal punishment compares a traditional understanding of divine judgment and hell with latitudinarian thought: Paul C. Davies, “The Debate on Eternal Punishment in Late Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century English Literature,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 4, no. 3 (1971): 257–76. Fiering, among others, wrongly concludes that previous Christian tradition had little to no compassion for those under God’s wrath and condemnation. For example, D.P. Walker notes that only two ministers—Peter Sterry and Jeremiah White (who believed in universal salvation)—preached a unique message of God’s compassion for suffering sinners based on God’s love—with previous Christian tradition featuring a God and his saints who find bliss in the damned. D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell : Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (University of Chicago Press, 1964), 111. See also, Norman Sykes, “The Theology of Divine Benevolence,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 16, no. 3 (September 1947): 278–91. Such statements are misleading. The seventeenth-century Puritans, who would reject modern anthropology and a theology of universal salvation, not only preached the immense compassion of God for sinners but also wept for their salvation. John Flavel is a preeminent example.

¹¹ Schliesser, *Sympathy*, 185.

¹² Examples of empathy-based ethics permeating the academic disciplines: In the area of philosophy, Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (London: Routledge, 2007). In journalism, Janet Blank-Libra and Geneva Overholser, *Pursuing an Ethic of Empathy in Journalism* (New York: Routledge, 2016). In medicine, David Ian Jeffrey, *Empathy-Based Ethics: A Way to Practice Humane Medicine* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). In social and political theory, Anthony M. Clohesy, *Politics of Empathy: Ethics, Solidarity, Recognition* (London: Routledge, 2013).

contemporary empathy-based ethics that pose challenges for the exercise of compassion in pastoral ministry. First, it has rejected transcendent commitments and embraced “ethical subjectivism” and “expressive individualism”; as a result, there “is now no consensus about what it is that should evoke our empathy and sympathy.”¹³ Trueman asks, “What should elicit our sympathetic care”—the pregnant teenager or the baby in the womb? Second, it determines what is good by “personal emotional preference.” While Rousseau would arguably reject moral relativism “as a necessary implication,” emotivism becomes the primary backbone of contemporary ethical discourse.¹⁴ Third, it accepts that personal testimony is the “highest form of authority” because of the unique power of “empathy in shaping morality.”¹⁵ Personal narratives of suffering, exclusion, and oppression wield a tremendous influence in moral evaluation.

Empathy-driven Psychology

According to many schools of psychology, empathy is central and fundamental to the helping process. Despite the disagreements over the terminology related to empathy (often phenomenological), many adopt a definition based on the term’s etymological construction (prefix plus *παῖθος*), “to feel in.”¹⁶ Therefore, empathy is to know and feel the experience of others, placing oneself “in their shoes” to experience their emotion. It is not simply that “I feel with you in your hurt” but that “I feel your hurt.” Stated technically, empathy “has generally been assigned the role of denoting the relevant mechanisms of emotion transfer.”¹⁷ Empathic approaches to soul care have

¹³ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 122.

¹⁴ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 121.

¹⁵ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 402-03.

¹⁶ Roughley and Schramme reveal the sharp differences among scholars on the differences between the forms of fellow feeling and the phenomenology of empathy itself. See Neil Roughley and Thomas Schramme, eds., *Forms of Fellow Feeling: Empathy, Sympathy, Concern and Moral Agency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3–30.

¹⁷ Neil Roughley and Thomas Schramme, eds., *Forms of Fellow Feeling*, 16–17.

liberally applied empathy across a broad spectrum of psychological arenas including marriage therapy, personal emotional intelligence, childrearing, neuropsychology, social psychology, and attachment theory.

Though Edward Titchener has been credited with translating the English term *empathy* from German, much of the history of the concept originates with the German aesthetician and psychologist Theodore Lipps and philosophers Hermann Lotze and Robert Visser. Debes argues that the initial usage aimed to settle a philosophical problem—namely, the question of other minds.¹⁸ Even so, the concept also advanced contemporaneously in American social psychology, which attempted to develop the notion for its usefulness in psychological care. In contemporary psychology, empathy has received special attention given the field’s earnest commitment to the centrality of emotion.¹⁹ As an alternative to the rampant determinism found in twentieth century psychology, emotion-focused strategies, pioneered by architects such as Leslie Greenberg, have shifted the theory and practice of the therapeutic community to a primary emphasis on emotion.²⁰ With the rise of emotion-focused approaches, empathy has come to serve as a bedrock, or an underlying assumption for virtually all modern psychological approaches. In counseling, empathy has generally been accepted as indispensable in the helping process.

An empathy-driven psychology presents several challenges for pastoral ministry. First, while not universally accepted among the modalities, the general

¹⁸ Moreland and Craig articulate this problem as a metaphysical and epistemological issue: “If dualism is true, we can never know that other people have mental states because those states are private mental entities to which we have no direct access.” J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 245–46.

¹⁹ Powlison asserts that emotion has become the foundation for most decision-making and counsel. David Powlison, “What Do You Feel?,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 10, no. 4 (1992): 50.

²⁰ Greenberg has written prolifically on Emotion Focused Therapy, or EFT. For a description of EFT, see Leslie S. Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy*, Revised edition (Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association, 2016). For an in-depth examination of the EFT helping process, see Leslie S. Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Coaching Clients to Work Through Their Feelings* (Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association, 2015).

psychological milieu supports the claim that empathy is fundamentally necessary (though not necessarily sufficient) for personal change. If this assertion is true, then it follows that all pastoral care needs to submit (to some degree) to the logic of empathy. Second, an empathy-driven psychology also outsources many answers (historically found in classical Christianity) to human problems. The issue of shame serves as an example. Traditionally settled in the forgiveness of sins in the atonement of Christ, modern psychology appeals to the power of empathic acceptance in the counselor-client relationship to provide an antidote to shame.²¹ Third, an empathy-driven approach to soul care potentially leads to subjectivism and the elevation of feeling over objective truth.²² Approaches that centralize a pastor's empathic concern for another person's experience potentially undermines his ability (even permissibility) to question and challenge that experience.

Empathy-accommodated Theology

Empathy-accommodated theology tends to begin with cultural notions of empathy instead of theologically grounded convictions. Thus, strategies for pastoral care start with notions of empathy and then seek theological justification. Kwon, for example, argues for a form of empathic "clinical incarnation" in ministry, stating that "the act of understanding a certain person is similar to the incarnation process in which Jesus Christ "suffered into" earth as a human being."²³ Underwood, on the other hand, attempts to

²¹ Brown has been widely regarded as advocating "shame resiliency" through the power of empathy. Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me (but It Isn't): Making the Journey from "What Will People Think?" To "I Am Enough,"* (New York: Avery, 2007).

²² Jones and Butman articulate various dangers of an emotional centered approach including problems of identity and 'self-construction' as well as moral judgment, wherein feelings determine virtue. Stanton L. Jones and Richard E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*, 2nd edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 318.

²³ Soo-Young Kwon, "How Can We Practice Empathy in Pastoral Counseling? Cultivating the Clinical Virtue of Christian Incarnation," *Reflective Practice* 32 (2012), 121. The notion of "incarnational ministry" or "incarnational compassion" is quite common. Stott, for example, discusses the church's incarnational identity with the use of empathy "to penetrate other people's worlds, as he penetrated ours." John Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 53. Smedes, on the other hand, utilizes the nomenclature that God became "inghettoed" in human history in Christ to know and experience human suffering. See Lewis B Smedes, "Suffering: The Christian Style of Life," *Reformed Journal* 19, no. 2 (February 1969): 11–13. Also, Lewis B Smedes, "The Suffering Body,"

relate the practice of empathy with the ministry of the Word, metaphorically linking the practice of empathy with proclamation.²⁴ Additional approaches pair notions of compassion fatigue, self-regard, and self-empathy (i.e. self-compassion) to fight pastoral burnout. These are often justified by the theological imperatives (laws) of Scripture including the need for personal humility and avoidance of self-hatred.²⁵ While heavily centered on the topic of compassion, these strategies risk compromising fidelity to orthodoxy and abandoning a biblical foundation because of their theologically accommodating notions of compassionate care.

Given this reality, several dangers threaten contemporary pastoral ministry. First, pastors might be tempted to alter theology proper, God's self-disclosure about his nature, presenting him in the image of man whereby he is not "the same, yesterday, today and forever," but changes according to the concerns of the moment.²⁶ Second, pastors might find it difficult to discern what is "honorable," "just," and "pure," given that their theology is changing according to an individual's personal experience.²⁷ Such shifts

Reformed Journal 19, no. 1 (January 1969): 4–6. While Billings offers a critique of incarnational ministry in his work *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church*, Metzger identifies such critique as a false dilemma, instead arguing for a proper use of incarnational terminology. Paul Louis Metzger, "Fleshed out: The False Dilemma of Union with Christ versus Incarnational Ministry," *Cultural Encounters* 9, no. 2 (2013): 100–103.

²⁴ Ralph Underwood, *Empathy and Confrontation in Pastoral Care* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002). While Underwood's project aims to reconcile empathy with confrontation, pushing against a pastoral approach that singularly favors a Rogerian, non-directive approach to pastoral counseling, it is clear that his starting point consists of a psychologically-derived notion of empathy.

²⁵ Cameron Lee and Aaron Rosales, "Self-Regard in Pastoral Ministry: Self-Compassion versus Self-Criticism in a Sample of United Methodist Clergy," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 48, no. 1 (March 2020): 29. Hogue, on the other hand, emphasizes the centrality of empathy and love in pastoral care through neuroscience. David Hogue, "Brain Matters: Neuroscience, Empathy, and Pastoral Theology," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 20, no. 2 (2010): 25–55.

²⁶ Hebrews 13:8 refers to the unchangeable and eternal nature of Christ. Some scholars on pastoral compassion advocate for a changing nature of God. Purves, for example, states, "God's compassion requires us to understand God now in terms of God's vulnerability and willingness to suffer with us. This calls for a revolution in our concept of God in which we no longer understand God to be an unchangeable, unaffected being who loves us in distant untouchability. Instead, we discover God to be the one who knows suffering intimately and who is changed by that experience." Andrew Purves, *The Search for Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 16.

²⁷ Philippians 4:8

promote a moral neutrality in pastoral care wherein the role of the minister is not to make moral judgments, but to enact a compassionate response in-and-of-itself. Lastly, pastors might fail to appreciate the essential relationship between sound Christology and compassionate pastoral care. They might easily blend Christ's "radical life of compassion" and "challenging imperatives of grace" with broader secular and social commitments. While the doctrine of the incarnation and the law of God are indeed essential, a pastoral theology of compassion must be "rooted in the wider theological teachings of the church"—especially union with Christ—to respond to these cultural realities.²⁸

The Neglect of Union with Christ

There are several reasons why the doctrine of union with Christ has not factored into the formulation of most approaches to pastoral compassion. First, contemporary pastoral theology tends to approach the discipline functionally, arranging ministerial work around the roles and operations of the pastor. Davis concurs, acknowledging that this approach structures the presentation "around the functions of parish ministry, rather than an overall theological framework as such."²⁹ These ministerial functions include visiting, preaching, counseling, shepherding, evangelizing, as well as the pastor's personal and social life. While this strategy helpfully gathers the myriad of

²⁸ Carl R. Trueman, "A Church for Exiles: Carl R. Trueman Explains Why Reformed Christianity Provides the Best Basis for Faith Today," *First Things* 245 (August 2014): 30.

²⁹ John Jefferson Davis, "Practicing Ministry in the Presence of God and in Partnership with God," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36, no. 2 (April 2012): 118. Davis argues that this approach has been characteristic of pastoral theology since the end of the nineteenth century through the twentieth century. He provides several examples of each. Examples toward the end of the nineteenth century: Alexandre R. Vinet, *Pastoral Theology; or, The Theory of the Evangelical Ministry*, trans. Thomas H. Skinner (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1853). William G.T. Shedd, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1867). Patrick Fairbairn, *Pastoral Theology; A Treatise on the Office and Duties of the Christian Pastor* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1875). Examples through the twentieth century: Martin Thornton, *Pastoral Theology: A Reorientation* (London: S.P.C.K., 1956). Larry Richards and Gib Martin, *A Theology of Personal Ministry: Spiritual Giftedness in the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1981). Thomas F. O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

responsibilities associated with pastoral work, it forfeits any theological framework and thereby runs the risk of falling into ministerial pragmatism.³⁰ Consequently, references to pastoral compassion frequently consist of cursory statements that place the pastor under the obligation of “feeling compassionate” in the various roles he assumes and circumstances he encounters. Given its functional emphasis, this approach does not adequately account for the doctrine of union with Christ as it relates to pastoral compassion.

Second, modern approaches to pastoral ministry tend to neglect the doctrine of union with Christ in formulating its understanding of compassion because of the cognitive-centered approach to modern theology. While the former reason emphasizes the practical aspects of pastoral ministry to the detriment of a theological foundation, this reason begins with theological formulation yet lacks pastoral and ministerial vision. While it strives to explain faithfully the breadth and depth of theological understanding, it falls short in addressing the needs of the whole man and the proper pastoral response. Noting that the people of God suffer from a fragmented view of the Christian faith, Beeke and Smalley write, “Today’s churches need theology that engages the head, heart, and hands. Too often, we have compartmentalized these aspects of life (as if we could cut ourselves into pieces).”³¹ This approach attaches the reality of Christian compassion to various theological doctrines such as the nature of God or the priesthood of Christ. Yet, such methods lack the pastoral perception to translate compassion into the context of human problems.

³⁰ Akin and Pace argue that the “pastorate may be driven by observations of other pastors, congregational expectations, and/or our own abilities” and become a “barometer of success” in the evaluation of ministry success and failure. Daniel L. Akin and R. Scott Pace, *Pastoral Theology: Theological Foundations for Who a Pastor Is and What He Does* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 3.

³¹ Joel Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Revelation and God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 18. Beeke points to Erickson’s *Christian Theology* for a balanced and holistic ministry that speaks to the intellectual, relational, and affective components of human experience. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 429.

Third, contemporary pastoral ministry is simply ill-equipped to explain how the doctrine of union with Christ ought to shape and inform its practices. Letham describes the characteristic challenge of simply defining union with Christ, noting, “The literature discusses at some length the relationship between union with Christ and justification, sanctification, or some other such matter. When one asks what in fact this union consists in, however, what it actually *is*, there is general silence.”³² Given this challenge, it stands to reason that there is an even greater difficulty in bridging the gap between the doctrine of union with Christ and its significance for pastoral ministry.³³ Still less apparent is how union with Christ informs an understanding of compassion in pastoral care. Pastoral theology tends to lean into doctrines that maintain a greater accessible connection between the doctrine itself and pastoral compassion; e.g., the nature of God, the nature of man, the law of God, and the incarnation of Christ.³⁴

Union with Christ and Pastoral Compassion

The doctrine of union with Christ serves as a core component of Flavel’s theology.³⁵ Devoting significant attention to the doctrine in *The Method of Grace*, he

³² Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2011), 1.

³³ Billings has offered a constructive critique to incarnational ministry and offered “participation ministry” in union with Christ as an alternative. J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for The Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 123–65. Likewise, Purves attempts to articulate a God-actualized approach participation ministry in union with Christ, wherein pastors participate with Christ, who “in his living personhood is the principal actor, the “thing in itself,” in whom we live and whose ministry we share.” Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 153.

³⁴ This is not to denigrate these doctrines but rather emphasize their predominant usage in formulating Christian or pastoral compassion. Beeke for instance, argues for a compassionate pathos by appealing to Paul’s exhortation in Galatians 6:1. Joel R. Beeke and Nick Thompson, *Pastors and Their Critics: A Guide to Coping with Criticism in the Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2020), 127. He also argues for compassion extended to all men based on the image of God. Joel Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Man and Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 128–29. Martin appeals to the “compassionate vulnerability” of Christ for pastoral imitation. Albert N. Martin, *The Man of God: His Shepherding, Evangelizing, and Counseling Labors*, vol. 3 (Montville, NJ: Trinity Pulpit Press, 2020), 24–27.

³⁵ Edwards asserts that union with Christ is a consistent theme in Flavel’s works, from his earliest writings to his last. 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, no.

identifies it as the goal for which the eternal Word assumed a human nature and accomplished the work of redemption. He writes, “Christ’s blood profits none but those that are in him.”³⁶ Moreover, union with Christ serves as the foundation for any moral union that believers have between them. More pertinent, union with Christ operates as a core doctrine in Flavel’s pastoral care. “The great aim and scope of all Christ’s ordinances and officers, are to bring men into union with Christ, and so build them up to perfection in him.”³⁷ While the compassionate nature of Christ is tremendously important to Flavel’s pastoral theology, the great question is not “Is Christ compassionate?” or “How are Christ’s ambassadors to imitate (or embody) Christ’s compassion?” Instead, the great question is “whether thou hast yet.”³⁸ Elsewhere, Flavel articulates the great question as follows: “whether a man be in Christ” or “whether God be our covenant-God, and we his people?”³⁹ Given Flavel’s primary pastoral concern of “being in Christ,” what implications might his explication of union with Christ have for a pastoral theology of compassion?

Christ and the Root of Pastoral Compassion

Contemporary advocacy for increasing compassion and empathy endanger pastoral theology by coincidentally placing the minister’s compassion as the central focus (or main help) in pastoral care. Describing the centrality of empathy in ministerial work, Wise writes, “Effective pastoral care, that is, meeting a person at the point of his need, demands that the pastor become involved in the very existence and predicament of the

1 (2012): 46.

³⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:15.

³⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:19–20.

³⁸ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:327.

³⁹ John Flavel, *The Balm of the Covenant Applied to the Bleeding Wounds of Afflicted Saints*, in *Works*, 6:115.

person . . . This involvement can take place only through a deeply empathic experience.”⁴⁰ While the compassionate disposition of the minister is a crucial starting point for pastoral care, such assertions root the effectiveness of ministerial work in the empathetic or compassionate frame of the pastor.⁴¹ The implicit danger is that the pastor’s actions and words becomes the essential source of relief. Lest the church’s ministry become “doomed to failure because we are not messianic”—a sentiment that subtly regards pastoral compassion as redemptive in its own right—ministerial care must place essential relief in Christ himself, the mercies of mercies.⁴²

Union with Christ leads pastoral theology to embrace him as the fundamental root (or subject) of compassion. In reference to the mystical union, Flavel not only describes Christ as the chief compassion, but also as the root and fountain of all compassionate mercies. “We are first grafted into Christ, and then suck the sap and fatness of the root.” It is from this root that all believers receive the vital sap of God’s mercies. This does not disparage or minimize the compassionate frame of pastors. The person of Christ stands as the example they imitate, and the commands of Christ remain the standard to which he submits. Yet, his vision of compassion acknowledges the insufficiency of all other roots. Alluding to Jeremiah 2:13, he writes, “To neglect God, and seek relief from the creature, is to forsake the fountain of living waters, and go to the broken cisterns which can hold no water.”⁴³ A pastoral endeavor that never intends to draw the believer to the source of compassion (Christ) fails to accomplish the primary

⁴⁰ Carroll A. Wise, *The Meaning of Pastoral Care* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 14.

⁴¹ Pierre and Reju rightly articulate the necessity of starting pastoral care with a compassionate disposition of mercy, love and respect. Jeremy Pierre and Deepak Reju, *The Pastor and Counseling: The Basics of Shepherding Members in Need* (Crossway, 2015), 59.

⁴² Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 151–52.

⁴³ Flavel, *The Balm of the Covenant*, in *Works*, 6:94. Jeremiah 2:13 states, “for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

calling given to ministers.

There are several implications for a pastoral theology of compassion. First, Flavel's pastoral care recognizes that ministerial compassion is essentially and fundamentally spiritual, intending to go beyond social, psychological, or material forms of relief.⁴⁴ As Warfield notes, "It was this spiritual destitution which most deeply moved his pity."⁴⁵ While he does not denigrate temporal forms of relief, often exemplifying and encouraging these forms of compassion, he assumes first a spiritual cause and need so that he prioritizes Christ and his choice mercies. Second, his pastoral care recognizes the finitude and inadequacy of the under-shepherd's compassion. Flavel recognizes the inadequacy of the pastor in his description of the efficacy of the preached Word: "It derives not this efficacy from the instrument by which is it ministered; let their gifts and abilities be what they will, it is impossible that ever such efforts should be produced from the strength of their natural and gracious abilities."⁴⁶ The main help and cure for souls does not reside in the pastor's empathy, given the fact that it is a "finite commodity."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ While the incarnation is essential in conceptualizing a pastoral theology of compassion (or simply Christian compassion), the incarnation itself may be utilized to describe a compassion not dissimilar from cultural forms of compassion that minimize or neglect the spiritual need. Gauger, for example, provides an example of social compassion from the example of Jesus' life. Robert William Gauger, "Toward an Example of Pastoral Care: Considering the Life of Jesus," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 68, no. 4 (December 2014): 1–5. Likewise, Nouwen emphasizes the social, existential, and experiential dimensions of compassions from the compassionate God who is with us. See Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Image, 2006). Also, Henri J M Nouwen, "Compassion: The Core of Spiritual Leadership," *Worship* 51, no. 1 (January 1977): 11–23.

⁴⁵ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2015), 98. Warfield notes the difficulty of separating the compassion of Christ in the cause and effects of spiritual destitution. DeYoung and Gilbert articulate a similar sentiment: "It simply was not Jesus' driving ambition to heal the sick and meet the needs of the poor, as much as he cared for them. He was sent into the world to save people from condemnation." Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 55.

⁴⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:57.

⁴⁷ Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart* (Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2019), 100.

Union and the Ground of Pastoral Compassion

The notion of unity is intimately connected with compassion. The classical philosophers clearly underscore this reality in seed form in their conceptualization of sympathy and the unity of the world.⁴⁸ Yet, Fiering recognizes that beginning in the seventeenth century, sentimentalism not only shifted to the nature of man as first principles (instead of the nature of God), but it placed the passions as a chief factor in the orientation of human bonds and natural unity.⁴⁹ Malebranche asserts that the inclinations and movements (or the passions) in the minds of men in moments of cries for help express “the strongest natural union that God has established between us and his works is that which binds us to the people with whom we live.”⁵⁰ Arguably, much of eighteenth century Romanticism proposed that the sentiments grounded the uniformity of human nature as well as provided a common moral law for humanity.⁵¹ The prevailing contemporary view posits that empathy builds upon a common human nature that “underpins moral codes in cultures around the world,” creating solidarity and founding the “human bonds that make life worth living.”⁵² Hence, while it should not be understated that unity and commonality are intimately connected with the notion of compassion, it should be recognized that contemporary sentimentalism views compassion, sympathy, or empathy as the grounds for unity.

Flavel’s pastoral care, on the other hand, reverses this order. “Union is the

⁴⁸ See Brouwer’s discussion on Stoic sympathy. Eric Schliesser, ed., *Sympathy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15–35.

⁴⁹ Norman S. Fiering, “Irresistible Compassion,” 201.

⁵⁰ Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth: With Elucidations of The Search after Truth*, ed. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 331–32.

⁵¹ Frazer provides the example of Johann Gottfried Herder in his articulation of a unity in human nature. Michael L. Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 154.

⁵² Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2015), xxii.

ground of sympathy,” he writes.⁵³ In other words, the alignment believers have with the concerns and interests of Christ in their union with him determines the shape of their mutual grief and burden-bearing. “Nor indeed can any gracious heart be unconcerned and senseless; for that union that all the saints have with Christ their head, and with one another, as fellow-members in Christ, will beget sympathy among them in their sufferings.”⁵⁴ But Flavel does not simply apply the ground of unity to sympathy, but also to the general notion of compassion. He asks, “Is there so strict and intimate a relation and union betwixt Christ and the saints?” His essential response is that such a union breeds care and compassion as Christ and the saints provide relief and sweet comfort to the members in the same body. Understandably, he draws the implication that ministers themselves must be united to Christ and animated by the Spirit that they might share not only in sympathetic concerns but gain the same tender-hearted nature. Since “those whom he sends have his *Spirit* in their *hearts*, as well as his words in their *mouths*,” their commission will be evidenced by how they are affected by the miseries of others.

Additionally, Flavel’s understanding of union with Christ and compassion underscores the necessity of covenantal unity—or covenantal commitment—as an essential criterion in the evaluation of pastoral compassion (or any form of fellow feeling—sympathy, pity, empathy, etc). Instead of being governed by the laws of universal, irresistible, or natural compassion, believers submit to a new moral government, ruled by their commitment to Christ. Invariably, pastoral compassion grounded in mere sentiment does not answer the question, “What should I have compassion for?” Instead, union governs how and to what objects individuals express their compassion.⁵⁵ In other words, there is a covenantal commitment behind one’s fellow

⁵³ John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed, or The Great Work of a Christian Explained and Applied*, in *Works*, 5:540.

⁵⁴ Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:541.

⁵⁵ This also holds true in the evaluation of empathy itself. Various scholars have attempted to

feeling that shapes and directs expressions of compassion and sympathy. This is why modern human history is filled with barbarism and cruelty justified by humanitarian compassion. As Fiering notes, “It has been fairly well established that the philosophical defense of cruelty and diabolism . . . which has followed like an ominous shadow behind humanitarianism, was an ironic by-product of the age of sensibility.”⁵⁶ Pastoral compassion does not first seek unity with others by way of empathy or sympathy, but rather considers union with Christ first by way of order, a union that directs the expression and determines the objects of compassion according to Christ’s commands and kingdom purposes.

Correspondingly, Flavel’s understanding of union as the grounds for compassion challenges the notion of compassionate (or therapeutic) neutrality for soul care. The predominant undercurrent of Rogerian “unconditional positive regard” and “empathic understanding” tempts pastors to avoid moral judgments as a form of compassion. At what point does soul care put aside the aims and means of a therapeutic alliance (or unity) for the sake of a moral evaluation? Arguably, the tenets of neutrality in soul care foster the belief that moral judgments in and of themselves are uncaring and callous. If union functions as the ground for compassion as Flavel asserts, then there exist

discredit the notion and practice of empathy outright. For example, Bloom argues from pragmatism against empathy. Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018). From a theological perspective, Rigney argues that empathy itself is a distorted form of compassion. See Joe Rigney, “The Enticing Sin of Empathy: How Satan Corrupts Through Compassion,” *Desiring God* (blog), May 31, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-enticing-sin-of-empathy>. See also, Joe Rigney, “Do You Feel My Pain?,” *Desiring God* (blog), May 2, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/do-you-feel-my-pain>. Plantinga, however, argues that even compassion itself (not specifically empathy) may become myopic and reflect a distortion of God’s standards. Cornelius Jr Plantinga, “Myopic Compassion,” *Reformed Journal* 37, no. 4 (April 1987): 5–6. The important argument to be made here is that it is more important to discern the governance of any form of fellow feeling—whether it be sympathy, compassion, empathy, or pity—over which forms of compassion are permissible by God’s standards. If empathy be a created human capacity to know, understand, and even feel another’s experience, it may be used righteously or wickedly.

⁵⁶ Norman S. Fiering, “Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 2 (1976): 213. Fiering cites several examples including Lester Crocker in discussing the moral thought of De Sade. Lester Crocker, *An Age of Crisis: Man and World in Eighteenth Century French Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959). He also cites Mario Praz on De Sade’s moral influence on the nineteenth century, Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1967).

only two basic moral trajectories—being “in Christ” or being “in Adam.” In other words, all expressions and acts of compassion are inherently religious. Any moral obligation to remain neutral (i.e. to make no moral judgment) reflects some type of commitment or religious union. Instead, union with Christ compels pastors to apply the tender-hearted mercies of Christ to all moral failures, thus enabling believers to live in the favor of Christ instead of an unconditional therapeutic acceptance.

Union with Christ and the Practice of Pastoral Compassion

Contemporary pastoral theology relies on various doctrines in the application of compassion in ministry. Many of these emphasize the imitation of Christ in his compassionate nature and earthly ministry. These doctrines include God’s compassionate attributes, the image of God in man, the imperatives of compassion in Scripture (e.g., Col 3:12), and the compassion of Christ in his incarnation. While these doctrines are important, union with Christ calls pastors not to *apply compassion* per se, but to *apply Christ*, who is in himself compassionate and tender-hearted. As Purves notes, pastoral ministry is not an *imitatio Christi* but a *participatio Christi*, in which “the church’s ministry people should expect to meet Jesus.”⁵⁷ Flavel demonstrates the significance of Christ for pastoral compassion in his preaching and counseling labors through communion, evangelism, and incorporation.

Communion. Union with Christ presses pastors to apply compassion through the special relation or communion man has with God in Christ. This includes both identification and participation. With respect to the former, in view is not *incarnational identification*, or the idea that “Christ identifies with me in my suffering.” Rather, it is

⁵⁷ Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 152. Winslow expresses this sentiment, “But if, taking the object of our solicitude by the hand, we gently lead him to God—if we conduct him to Jesus, portraying to his view the depth of His love . . . we have then most truly and most effectually soothed the sorrow, healed the wound, and strengthened the hand in God.” Octavius Winslow, *Short Works of Octavius Winslow* (Bottom of the Hill, 2014), 60.

covenantal identification, or that “Christ is identified with me in my suffering.” The former demonstrates the compassionate nature of Christ for any man, knowing and experiencing the weaknesses and infirmities of a fully human nature. The latter exemplifies the compassionate posture of Christ for believers only, whereby he provides comfort in accord with their relationship. Flavel demonstrates a pastoral compassion of identification in various ways, but especially in the doctrine of adoption, one of the primary benefits of union with Christ. “Believers are his children, and you know how naturally children engage and draw forth the father’s care for them. . . . Everyone takes care for his own; much more doth God for his own children.”⁵⁸ Elsewhere, Flavel writes, “Yea, there are not only bowels of compassion in our God, but the tenderness of bowels like those of a mother to her sucking child. He feels all our pains as if the apple of his eye were touched.”⁵⁹ In this way, ministers express the compassion of God with the believer’s new identity in Christ.

Second, Flavel expresses the unique compassion of God in union with Christ in terms of participation. Flavel asserts that believers participate in the glory of Christ, including his righteousness, grace, and sonship. Moreover, believers participate in the divine nature (not essentially) by which the soul is quickened and the whole inward man renewed. The infusion of spiritual life and the inhabitation of the soul by the Spirit produce a “sincere and true obedience.”⁶⁰ Yet, there exists a reciprocal nature in the communion: “We do not only partake of what is his, but he partakes of what is ours; he hath fellowship with us in all our wants, sorrows, miseries and afflictions.”⁶¹ Flavel depicts Christ’s participation in our afflictions by the analogy of the body and the head.

⁵⁸ John Flavel, *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*, in *Works*, 3:385

⁵⁹ John Flavel, *Divine Conduct, or The Mystery of Providence*, in *Works*, 4:449.

⁶⁰ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:94.

⁶¹ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:151.

Speaking of *corpus mysticum*, the church, Flavel believes that the head suffers when the members do. He also illustrates the fellowship and partaking in the marriage union between husband and wife, “wherein Christ and believers are considered as one person, in construction of law.”⁶² The concerns and sufferings of the wife become the concerns and afflictions of the husband. In sum, Flavel’s pastoral compassion demonstrates the nearness of Christ in his participation or sharing with believers in all their miseries.

Evangelism. In addition to communion with Christ, Flavel’s pastoral compassion leads him to a characteristically evangelistic pastoral practice. Clearly, he considers the eternal destiny of the soul as something that should stir compassion. “What a serious reflection should his occasion in every dispenser of the gospel. . . . to preach that word which is to be a savour of life or death unto these souls . . . O how should a thought melt his heart into compassion over them, and make him beg hard.”⁶³ Yet, while he treats salvation as a matter of compassion, he importantly regards it as the reality of union with Christ. The souls of convinced sinners not only discern the reality of Christ (or that he is), but also “that their eternal life is in their union with him.” In other words, Flavel considers evangelism as bringing individuals to be united to the root itself. Importantly, he describes the “hard and uncomfortable” doctrine that a mere acknowledgment of the merciful and compassionate nature of God and Christ is entirely insufficient for salvation. “But what is all this to thee, if thou art Christless? There is not one drop of saving mercy that comes in any other channel than Christ to the soul of any man?”⁶⁴ Hence, Flavel’s pastoral compassion is not content with describing the

⁶² Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:146.

⁶³ John Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized, or The Heavenly Use of Earthly Things*, in *Works*, 5:60.

⁶⁴ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:209.

compassionate nature of Christ, but rather earnestly strives to apply Christ to the unregenerate given that there is no spiritual or eternal mercy outside of Christ.

Incorporation. While general conceptions of pastoral compassion are understood as something the minister has (or does) toward the afflicted, union with Christ leads pastors to exhortation. Flavel unquestionably relies on the imperatives of Scripture to instruct the church to pursue a compassionate spirit. Yet, he frequently leans on compassion in union with Christ—especially believers’ incorporation into the body of Christ—to instruct them in Christian service. For example, he urges believers to sympathize with all the concerns of Christ, grieving with those who rise up against the knowledge of Christ and the kingdom of God.⁶⁵ Additionally, he calls all the saints to greater personal holiness, given that Christ has united them into his very bosom by his compassionate mercy.⁶⁶ Given the fact that believers are members of one another and of Christ, pastoral compassion exhorts the people of Christ to cultivate a tender sense of all the reproaches and dishonors done to the other members of the church.⁶⁷ Therefore, pastoral compassion calls the saints to look to their incorporation in Christ to pity and have compassion on all those to whom they are united, urging or exhorting the saints to have compassion on their fellow members by their purity of life and mature faith.

Conclusion

While the nature of God, the imperatives of Scripture, and the incarnation of Christ all serve as important doctrines in the formation of pastoral compassion, Flavel’s theology reveals the necessity of union with Christ for a full pastoral theology of compassion. A pastoral theology, rooted in union with Christ, crafts a compassion in soul

⁶⁵ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 3:17.

⁶⁶ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:267–68.

⁶⁷ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, in *Works*, 2:337.

care that is not only “like Christ” or “about Christ,” but “in Christ.” In this way, while pastoral care proclaims the compassionate nature of Christ and strives to imitate him in every ministerial labor, it also strives to apply Christ as the tender-hearted minister himself. “Christ is the channel of grace and mercy; through him . . . all the streams of mercy that flow from God to us, and all the returns of praise from us to God. All things are ours upon no other title but our being his.”⁶⁸ Hence, a pastoral care in union with Christ aims to apply Christ to the soul, for there is none more tender-hearted.

⁶⁸ Flavel, *Divine Conduct*, in *Works*, 4:450.

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ABSTRACT

NONE SO TENDER-HEARTED: THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PATTERN OF COMPASSION IN THE PASTORAL CARE OF JOHN FLAVEL

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This dissertation examines compassion as an integral component of John Flavel's pastoral theology. The research explores the connection between Flavel's Christology and pastoral care through a prism of three interconnected theological unions: the hypostatic union, the mystical union of believers to Christ, and the moral union of believers in Christ's mystical body. Flavel's Christological focus lies at the center of all his considerations of pastoral compassion. The dissertation also explores several moorings for pastoral compassion in contrast to contemporary empathy-centric approaches to soul care.

Chapter one introduces Flavel and his teaching, exploring the principal aspects of his life, nomenclature, and Christological focus. These point to his pastoral theology as a suitable focus of inquiry in the formulation of a theology of compassion.

Chapters two, three, and four outline Flavel's understanding of compassion as it relates to three doctrines. Chapter two examines the person and work of Christ, exploring Flavel's understanding of compassion with respect to the hypostatic union. Chapter three considers the believer's mystical union with Christ and how its realities influence Flavel's concept of pastoral compassion. Chapter four explores the union believers have with one another in Christ, demonstrating how Flavel understands pastoral compassion in the body of Christ.

Chapter five shows how Flavel's Christological pattern gives shape to his vision of the pastoral office. It also explores various topics of pastoral concern to demonstrate how Flavel's theology of compassion impacts his shepherding.

Chapter six demonstrates that pastoral care necessitates a holistic theology in formulating ministerial compassion. Union with Christ has been a neglected doctrine in formulating a pastoral theology of compassion. It informs a renewed vision of pastoral care in the face of empathy-centric notions of soul care.

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