

THE FOUNDATION OF JOY

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Assurance in the Theology of John Flavel

Jeff Strickland



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The Foundation of Joy
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For my wife,

Stephanie

You are such a gift from the Lord,
and this work is the fruit of your steadfast support
and unwavering belief.

For our two little men,

Carson Nolan and Knox William

I pray that you both will know Christ
and His incomparable joy.

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Preface

This work was made possible only due to the faithful and generous help of so many. My doctoral supervisor, Dr. Stephen Yuille, who first introduced me to John Flavel, proved to be a most dependable and valuable guide throughout the entirety of this process. I am truly grateful for his gifts, his time, and his friendship. I am also indebted to the diligent scholars of Flavel who have gone before me—especially Brian Cosby, Adam Embry, Clifford Boone, and Nathan Parker; their research and feedback have been immensely beneficial. Men like Dr. Joel Beeke, Dr. Don Whitney, Dr. Shawn Wright, and many others have shaped both me and this work greatly. Additionally, I cannot imagine completing a work like this one at any institution other than Southern Seminary, which God has used enormously for my good.

Finally, this project has required great sacrifice from my wife, Stephanie, and our two boys. Their love, patience, and encouragement has been exemplary. It is my joy to celebrate this accomplishment with them.

—Jeff Strickland

Introduction

“Spirituality,” as Alister McGrath explains, “is the outworking in real life of a person’s religious faith—what a person does with what they believe.”¹ In other words, spirituality is the experience of theology in everyday life. At times, it is difficult to ascertain precisely how a particular theological understanding affects the believer’s life. In the case of Christian assurance, however, this relationship is abundantly clear. Rare is the believer who, upon personal reflection, does not ask, “Am I really saved?” This is, in one sense, the all-important question of the Christian life. Its answer lies at the foundation of the believer’s hope and joy. Uncertainty here generates unrest and distress, while confidence enlivens and supports the soul in the midst of the most trying circumstances.

Given its significance to the Christian life, it is unfortunate that this doctrine has been mired in confusion and controversy throughout much of the church’s history.² Because of its inextricable relationship

1. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 2.

2. The varying views on assurance can be divided into three primary categories (with variations within each). The first belongs to the Roman Catholic Church. For all intents and purposes, it denies any normative experience of assurance. This is due, in part, to the belief that salvation may be lost, and that final perseverance is rarely, if ever, guaranteed. The Council of Trent declares, “No one, moreover, as long as he is in this mortal life, ought so far to presume as regards the secret mystery of divine predestination, as to determine for certain that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate; as if it were true, that he that is justified, either cannot sin any more, or if he does sin, that he ought to promise himself an assured repentance; for except by special revelation, it cannot be known whom God has chosen unto himself.” Philip Schaff and David S. Schaff, eds., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and*

to other core doctrines, the doctrine of assurance is, in the words of Matthew Pinson, “a handy gauge of one’s theological vantage point.”³ He adds, “The way people handle this subject tells a great deal about where they locate themselves on the theological spectrum.”⁴ It follows, therefore, that this doctrine also proves to be an excellent gauge of one’s spirituality. It acts as a signpost, for it reveals one’s theological perspective while at the same time displaying what lies at the core of his or her vision of the Christian life. As such, it proves to be an important foundation stone in the study of spirituality.

The evidence of this assertion is on display in the Puritan movement.⁵ It is possible to study Puritanism from ecclesiastical, political, and theological vantage points, yet at its center it was primarily “a spiritual movement, passionately concerned with God and godliness.”⁶ Behind this passion for God and godliness stands the doctrine of

Critical Notes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 2:103. For more on this, see Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Edward J. Gratsch, ed., *Principles of Catholic Theology: A Synthesis of Dogma and Morals* (New York: Alba House, 1981). The second category belongs to Calvinistic Protestantism. It disagrees with Roman Catholicism, affirming that assurance of salvation is both possible and normative for the Christian. Believing that the Bible teaches that Christians persevere to the end, it sees assurance as one of the great blessings of life in Christ, even though many believers may struggle to experience it. For more on this, see Louis Berkhof, *The Assurance of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939); Robert A. Peterson, *Our Secure Salvation: Preservation and Apostasy* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2009); Joel R. Beeke, *Knowing and Growing in Assurance of Faith* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2017); and Donald S. Whitney, *How Can I Be Sure I’m a Christian? The Satisfying Certainty of Eternal Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2019). The third category is Arminian Protestantism, which maintains that while assurance of present salvation is standard for a believer, assurance of final salvation is not. Believers can fall away from Christ and thus lose their salvation. For more on this, see Mark A. Noll, “John Wesley and the Doctrine of Assurance,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132, no. 526 (April 1975): 161–78; Michael Scott Horton and J. Matthew Pinson, eds., *Four Views on Eternal Security* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002); and I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974).

3. Horton and Pinson, *Four Views*, 7.

4. Horton and Pinson, *Four Views*, 7.

5. See chapter 2 of this volume.

6. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: A Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990), 28. See also J. Stephen Yuille, *Puritan Spirituality: The Fear of God in the Affective Theology of George Swinnock* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 5–17.

assurance. As R. M. Hawkes notes, “In English Puritan theology, the doctrine of assurance is of abiding importance. Any description of the aims of Puritanism must include...reforming the hearts of men.... [This] internal reformation of the Puritan’s pilgrim soul was to seek an assured faith following God’s revealed way to himself.”⁷ The Puritans understood the importance of rightly handling the doctrine of assurance, as evidenced by the significant place it occupies in their thought and practice.⁸ A case in point is the seventeenth-century pastor, John Flavel (1630–1691).

This book focuses on Flavel for two chief reasons. The first is the extent to which the doctrine of assurance informs Flavel’s spirituality.⁹ Not only is this emphasis evident in his teaching and preaching (rarely does he preach or write without some acknowledgment of assurance) but it is also extremely prevalent in his life. As one anonymous biographer observes,

These things being previously dispatched, he tried himself by the scripture marks of sincerity and regeneration; by this means he attained to a well-grounded assurance, the ravishing comforts of which were many times shed abroad in his soul; this made him a powerful and successful preacher, as one who spoke from his own heart to those of others.¹⁰

Flavel only preached what he first applied to himself. He powerfully expounded the truths of the gospel as one who had been transformed by them. Because of his experience of the joy of a well-grounded assurance, Flavel labored throughout his ministry to

7. R. M. Hawkes, “The Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 2 (September 1990): 248.

8. For example, see Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*, American University Studies 89 (New York: P. Lang, 1991), 192–93nn8–9.

9. For example, Flavel notes this doctrine throughout his forty-two sermons within *The Fountain of Life*: the introductory epistle; sermons 3, 6, 8, 10, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 36, 38, 39, 42. See John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life: A Display of Christ in His Essential and Mediatorial Glory*, in *Works of John Flavel*, vol. 1 (1820; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015).

10. “The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Minister of Dartmouth,” in *Works of John Flavel* (1820; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 1:xi–xii.

impress upon his flock the need for an experience of assurance of salvation in Christ.

The second reason for choosing Flavel is his relative anonymity. The lack of research into his life and ministry is astounding, especially considering the extent of his influence in his own day. One of his congregants declared,

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.¹¹

Flavel's influence was not limited to his local congregation. Anthony à Wood (1632–1695), a historian and contemporary, noted that Flavel obtained “more disciples than ever John Owen the Independent, or Richard Baxter the Presbyterian did.”¹² Flavel was recognized not only as a preacher but as a writer—one of his biographers and friends, John Galpine (n.d.), noted that he was “famous among the writers of this age.”¹³ Galpine tells the story of a London bookstore owner in 1673, who encountered a young gentleman in search of playbooks. The owner gave one of Flavel's works to the man. The young man threatened to burn the book and wanted nothing to do with it. Eventually, he took it, and a month later he returned to the store, exclaiming, “Sir, I most heartily thank you for putting this book into my hands; I bless God that moved you to do it, it hath saved my soul; blessed be God that ever I came into your shop.”¹⁴ As

11. “Life of the Late,” 1:vi.

12. Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses: An Exact History of All the Writers and Bishops Who Have Had Their Education in the University of Oxford* (New York: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, et al., 1820), 4:323.

13. 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, Mass.: Rhwhym Books, 2000), 13.

14. “Life of the Late,” 1:xiv.

the story goes, the young man purchased a hundred of Flavel's books to distribute among the poor.

Flavel's influence was also well documented by his opponents. Edmund Elys (1633–1708), a critic and contemporary, writes, "Sir, I congratulate to you the virtue of your good design for the service of the church, & I hope I shall be able to give you some assistance in it especially in reference to these three enemies of the church whose writings have made so much noise in the world, Dr. Owen, R. Baxter, & John Flavel."¹⁵ Elys was right to speak of "the world" in his critique, for Flavel's ministry was known, not only in England but across the Atlantic in New England. As Increase Mather (1639–1723) explains in the preface to one of Flavel's works: "The worthy author of the discourse emitted herewith, is one whose praise in the gospel is throughout all churches. His other books have made his name precious and famous in *both Englands*."¹⁶

Flavel's influence not only crossed oceans but spanned generations, as seen in the writings of the two towers of the First Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) and George Whitefield (1714–1770). Edwards frequently quotes Flavel in his famous work *Religious Affections*, and Whitefield not only carried Flavel's works on his travels but said that they were "enquired after, and bought up, more and more every day."¹⁷

Flavel's life and ministry clearly deserve more attention and consideration. The precision of his theological understanding, the illustrative and applicative style of his preaching, and the richness of his deep biblical spirituality should make him as popular today as he was in his own day and in the immediate generations that followed him. This book seeks to contribute to the recovery of this neglected Puritan by delving into the essence of his spirituality—namely, what he perceived to be the joy of assurance.

15. Clifford B. Boone, *Puritan Evangelism: Preaching for Conversion in Late Seventeenth Century English Puritanism as Seen in the Works of John Flavel* (London: Paternoster, 2013), 37.

16. Increase Mather, preface to John Flavel, *England's Duty under the Present Gospel Liberty*, in *Works*, 4:16. Italics in the original.

17. George Whitefield, quoted in Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 143.

No Longer Lost, but Lacking

With the resurgence of Puritan studies over the past fifty years, there has been some renewed interest in Flavel. In terms of academic studies, there are five doctoral dissertations. The first was produced by Kwai Chang in 1952. He presents a helpful biographical summary of Flavel's life, ministry, and teaching.¹⁸ As the first academic contribution to this field of study, Chang's thesis represents a solid introduction, but says little about Flavel's spirituality or understanding of assurance. John Thomas produced the second Flavel dissertation in 2007, analyzing Flavel's preaching.¹⁹ Employing James Shaddix's understanding of application, Thomas documents Flavel's use of application in his sermons.²⁰ While Flavel's preaching is significant to understanding his spirituality, Thomas's analysis is narrow in focus and lends little to this study or to research on Flavel as a whole.

Of far greater significance is the third dissertation, produced by Clifford Boone in 2009. It has been published as *Puritan Evangelism: Preaching for Conversion in Late Seventeenth-Century English Puritanism as seen in the Works of John Flavel*. Boone's research centers on Flavel's evangelistic zeal and seeks to show the relationship between his theological convictions and homiletic style. Boone writes, "Our contention is that within the generally accepted homiletic framework of this tradition the Puritan preacher's understanding of the effectual call was the main factor that influenced the content, arrangement, and presentation of his sermons to the unconverted."²¹ After placing his study in the larger context of Flavel's ministry and Puritan preaching, Boone devotes much of his work to explaining Flavel's doctrines of man, sin, and effectual call, and how these directly influenced the content and style of Flavel's preaching. His work provides a helpful overview of Puritan preaching, offers useful insights into Flavel's life and ministry, and establishes the foundation for further study of his

18. Kwai Sing Chang, "John Flavel of Dartmouth, 1630–1691" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1952).

19. John Thomas Jr., "An Analysis of the Use of Application in the Preaching of John Flavel" (PhD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007).

20. Jim Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon: Changing the Way Pastors Preach and Congregations Listen* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003).

21. Boone, *Puritan Evangelism*, 3.

understanding and practice of theology. Boone's thesis represents an important building block in the study of Flavel but touches very little on his spirituality.

The fourth dissertation, written in 2012, is Brian Cosby's "The Theology of Suffering and Sovereignty as Seen in the Writings and Ministry of John Flavel."²² Cosby's work presents Flavel's teaching on one of the most critical concerns of the Christian life—namely, the relationship between human suffering and divine sovereignty. Cosby argues two primary theses. First, he asserts, "Flavel quantitatively and pastorally developed the theology of the Westminster Assembly by articulating an understanding of human suffering and divine sovereignty with greater theological precision and pastoral application."²³ Second, he contends, "Flavel believed that human suffering and divine sovereignty are not two unrelated concepts, but rather exist together as theologically coherent realities."²⁴ Cosby defends these two theses by exploring the theology of suffering and sovereignty first in the great corpus of Puritan thinking, then in Flavel's writing, and finally in Flavel's ministry to the suffering. The result is a clear presentation of a motif that was central to Flavel's life. Cosby's work is of great benefit to the present work. Not only does he demonstrate Flavel's indebtedness to the Westminster divines and John Calvin, he also devotes an entire chapter to Flavel's understanding of the doctrine of assurance, demonstrating its significance in his ministry. This work provides a foundation upon which to build, as well as the rationale for investigating the relationship between Flavel's doctrine of assurance and the pursuit of joy.

The final dissertation was completed by Nathan Parker in 2013: "Proselytisation and Apocalypticism in the British Atlantic World: The Theology of John Flavel."²⁵ Parker focuses on Flavel's theology of conversion and how it shaped his evangelistic preaching. While there

22. Brian H. Cosby, "The Theology of Suffering and Sovereignty as Seen in the Writings and Ministry of John Flavel, ca. 1630–1691" (PhD diss., Australian College of Theology, 2012).

23. Cosby, "Theology of Suffering," 11.

24. Cosby, "Theology of Suffering," 11–12.

25. Nathan Thomas Parker, "Proselytisation and Apocalypticism in the British Atlantic World: The Theology of John Flavel" (PhD diss., Durham University, 2013).

is some overlap with Boone's work, Parker charts a different course in terms of his emphasis. In his work, he interacts with Flavel's doctrine of assurance and its significance for his ministry. He writes, "Flavel perhaps spoke more about assurance than any other facet of Christian salvation."²⁶ Parker notes the significance of assurance for Flavel's theology and ministry, but he does not explore its centrality to understanding Flavel's spirituality.

In addition to these dissertations, there are several books and theses on Flavel.²⁷ Of particular significance is Adam Embry's book, *Keeper of the Great Seal of Heaven*, which explores Flavel's understanding of the sealing of the Holy Spirit in detail.²⁸ "This book," writes Embry, "specifically examines John Flavel's (1627–1691) view of sealing of the Spirit, that is, assurance of salvation, in relation to his life and writings."²⁹ He describes Flavel's view of the Holy Spirit, specifically His work of sealing. Embry concludes with a brief discussion of the impact of Flavel's thought on future generations, especially those within the evangelical movement. Embry helpfully shows the connection between Flavel's doctrine of the Spirit and his understanding of assurance. His work, along with Cosby's, provides the most in-depth look into Flavel's conception of assurance. Embry's focus, however, is especially on Flavel's notion of the sealing of the Spirit and how it relates to the idea of the immediate witness of the Holy Spirit as expressed by certain Puritan

26. Parker, "Proselytisation," 132n387.

27. For example, see Stephen Yuille, *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel's Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007); Brian H. Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life and Thought in Stuart England* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2014); Brian H. Cosby, *Suffering and Sovereignty: John Flavel and the Puritans on Afflictive Providence* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012); and Adam Embry, *An Honest, Well-Experienced Heart: The Piety of John Flavel*, Profiles in Reformed Spirituality (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012). Additionally, two Master's theses have been completed on Flavel in recent years: Lewis James Greenwood Allen, "The Theologian as Pastor: The Life, Times and Ministry of John Flavel" (ThM thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2014); Douglas McCallum, "The Christology of John Flavel" (ThM thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2017).

28. 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).

29. Embry, *Keeper*, 1.

writers.³⁰ Thus, Embry provides little discussion of how assurance connects to Flavel's spirituality or understanding of joy.

Flavel's Heart: His Spirituality

Though John Flavel is no longer the "lost Puritan," there is still much of this faithful pastor's life and theology to bring to light.³¹ This book seeks to contribute to a fuller understanding of Flavel by considering an area largely ignored—his spirituality. Here, one is able to see into the very heart of Flavel and his ministry. The main goal of this work, then, is to demonstrate the link between Flavel's understanding of the doctrine of assurance and the pursuit of joy. The aim is to see that joy is the hallmark of his spirituality, and that such joy is to a great extent informed by his understanding of what it means to be assured of salvation in Christ. This is captured in the title of this work, which will unpack Flavel's understanding of the doctrine of assurance, and then demonstrate its essence in the pursuit of joy and its expression in looking to Jesus, discerning the Spirit, obeying the law, carrying the cross, and keeping the heart. While the use of *essence* is not to imply *only*—there are other aspects to his joy and spirituality—it is to contend that the joy of assurance is central to Flavel's spirituality.

Flavel's Joy: A Seeker Not a Stealer

The chief concern of this present work is to discuss and display John Flavel's spirituality, especially his emphasis on the connection between joy and assurance. It should be noted, however, that this book does

30. Embry, at time, seems to place Flavel in this "immediate witness" camp. For instance, Embry describes Flavel's view of the immediate witness as similar to Sibbes's and Goodwin's, and then quotes Goodwin, stating that the "sealing of the Holy Spirit is an *immediate* assurance by a heavenly and divine light of a divine authority, which the Holy Ghost sheddeth in a man's heart." Embry, *Keeper*, 85. Though Embry qualifies that Flavel does not understand the sealing of the Holy Spirit as only an immediate witness, such a distinction is not always clear. While Flavel, only at certain points in his life, does allow for an immediate witness of the Spirit to assurance, he very rarely makes any appeal to this type of experience and overwhelmingly speaks of sealing and assurance in a way that aligns with the dominant Puritan understanding recorded in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF).

31. See Brian H. Cosby, "John Flavel: The Lost Puritan," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3, no. 1 (January 2011): 113–32.

provide a valuable example of how some Puritan pastors handled assurance. Flavel strongly held, as this book will demonstrate, that a thoroughly biblical pursuit of assurance would lead to a rich and robust joy in Christ. Flavel was intent to seek the joy of his people, not steal from it. Such a desire, as Jean Williams asserts, might seem out of place with how Flavel's contemporaries and current scholarship have understood the Puritan endeavor for assurance. She writes, "For the Puritans were aware that self-examination could lead to pastoral problems for those with a natural tendency to introspection and self-doubt. Contemporaries accused Puritan piety of causing melancholy, and modern scholars have viewed it as productive of anxiety and despair."³²

This book will show that Flavel indeed understood the dangers of introspection and self-doubt and sought to alleviate such problems through directing his hearers toward Christ's work on their behalf and the Spirit's work in their hearts. His preaching exemplified Williams's description of the Puritans:

They warned their hearers to examine their hearts for good as well as evil, and to be encouraged by the smallest graces; they directed troubled believers away from introspection and to obedience, for a sense of God's love would inevitably follow; and they encouraged those obsessed with self-examination to take up meditation on God's blessings.³³

Flavel's concern was for the joy of his people, not only in eternity but also in their present life on earth. He believed that such delight in Christ could only be truly experienced if believers had assurance that they were in Christ. Flavel, then, like many of his Puritan peers, did not fit the decidedly dour connotation they have often been given. They were not "'prudish,' 'sexually repressed,' 'prohibitionist,' 'busy-body snoopers'—the types of things that led the twentieth century social critic H. L. Mencken to define puritanism as 'the fear that someone,

32. Jean Dorothy Williams, "The Puritan Quest for the Enjoyment of God: An Analysis of the Theological and Devotional Writings of Puritans in Seventeenth Century England" (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 1997), 81.

33. Williams, "Puritan Quest," 81.

somewhere, may be happy.”³⁴ This book will show that despite the many difficulties Flavel endured, he knew great joy in Christ, and ministered so that his people might as well.

Flavel’s Life and Ministry: A Brief Sketch

John Flavel “was, by all measures, an English Puritan.”³⁵ He was “a preacher, husband, father, nonconformist, sufferer, and victim of repeated persecution,” who “had at one time more disciples than John Owen and Richard Baxter.”³⁶ In addition, he “was a prolific preacher and writer—his collected works filling six volumes.”³⁷ All this makes him an exemplar of the Puritan pastor.

He was born in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, in 1630, into a family deeply rooted in the Puritan movement.³⁸ His father, Richard, was a Presbyterian minister, who, by all accounts, was a dedicated and esteemed pastor. “He was a person of such extraordinary piety, that those who conversed with him, said, they never heard one vain word drop from his mouth.”³⁹ Flavel gives the following assessment of his father:

34. Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.

35. Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life*, 4.

36. Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life*, 4. While Cosby does not cite the source of this assertion, it likely comes from an unknown contemporary of Flavel, recorded in Wood, *Athenae*, 323. Nathan Parker notes some question as to the validity of the quote being associated with this work, but not with its veracity as a whole; see Parker, “Proselytisation,” 21n17.

37. Yuille, *Inner Sanctum*, 2.

38. Controversy surrounds the date of Flavel’s birth. While many scholars point to the years 1627 or 1628 (so articulated by the anonymous biographer whose “The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Minister of Dartmouth” begins vol. 1 of Flavel’s *Works*), Cosby argues for the year 1630 due to the date of his baptism falling in that year. See Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life*, 14. For those who agree with Cosby, see Chang, “John Flavel”; and James William Kelly, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eds. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. “Flavell, John (bap. 1630, d. 1691).” Those who argue the early date for Flavel’s birth include the following: Yuille, *Inner Sanctum*; Embry, *Honest*; Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006).

39. “Life of the Late,” 1:iii.

For my own part, I must profess before the world, that I have a high value for this mercy, and do, from the bottom of my heart, bless the Lord, who gave me a religious and tender father, who often poured out his soul to God for me: he was one that was inwardly acquainted with God; and being full of bowels to his children, often carried them before the Lord, prayed and pleaded with God for them, wept and made supplications for them. This stock of prayers and blessings left by him before the Lord, I cannot but esteem above the fairest inheritance on earth.⁴⁰

While they were imprisoned in London for nonconformity, Flavel's parents contracted the plague. They died shortly after their release in 1665,⁴¹ leaving behind three sons.⁴²

Flavel followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a Puritan minister after attending University College, Oxford. Having come to a saving knowledge of Christ during college, Flavel accepted a call to ministry in 1650 to assist Mr. Walplate, the minister of Diptford, in the county of Devon.⁴³ Shortly after this appointment, he traveled to Salisbury to be ordained as a Presbyterian pastor.⁴⁴ While Flavel's time in Diptford was brief, it was not without significance. During these five years, he succeeded Mr. Walplate as pastor. In addition, he married, was widowed, and married again.⁴⁵

40. Flavel, *Fountain*, 1:257. See also his statements concerning the significance of godly parents in 4:371–72, which likely also hint of his experience growing up in the Flavel home.

41. For a description of this event, see “The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel,” in *Works*, 1:iii–iv.

42. There is some confusion on this point. Flavel's biographer mentions only John and Phineas, as does John Quick, but Richard's will includes a third son, Abiather, as well as three daughters: Anne, Elizabeth, and Deborah. See Edmund Calamy and A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised: Being a Revision of Edmund Calamy's Account of the Ministers and Others Ejected and Silenced, 1660–1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 201; Chang, “John Flavel,” 19; Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life*, 27n10.

43. “Life of the Late,” 1:iv.

44. Chang, “John Flavel,” 22.

45. Flavel married Jane Randal, “a pious gentlewoman, of a good family, who died in travail of her child without being delivered.” “Life of the Late,” v. John mourned the loss of his wife and first child, writing in *A Token for Mourners*, “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

In 1656, Flavel moved with his family to Dartmouth, where he would—except for a time of exile—minister for the rest of his life. He succeeded the recently deceased Reverend Anthony Hartwood, who had previously befriended Flavel, after witnessing his godly leadership during a provincial synod.⁴⁶ Flavel began his time in Dartmouth preaching alongside colleague Allen Geare, who was very ill and would eventually pass in December 1662.⁴⁷ As these two men worked together, “Flavell ministered in St Clement’s, Townstal, the ancient parish church overlooking Dartmouth, and on alternate Wednesdays he lectured in St Saviour’s, a daughter church in town.”⁴⁸ During this time, Flavel’s reputation as a godly minister and effective preacher increased.

Beginning in 1662, however, Flavel’s ministry changed dramatically with the enactment of the Clarendon Code—a series of four legal statutes passed between 1661–1665.⁴⁹ The most significant of these statutes was the Act of Uniformity in August 1662.⁵⁰ It essentially put Puritan ministers to the supreme test: “Abandon your puritan principles or abandon your pulpit.”⁵¹ The subsequent Sunday “was remembered

son.” John Flavel, *A Token for Mourners: Or the Advice of Christ to a Distressed Mother, Bewailing the Death of Her Dear and Only Son* (1674), in *Works of John Flavel* (1820; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 5:604. Following the encouragement of friends, Flavel married his second wife, Elizabeth Morris. See Chang, “John Flavel,” 23.

46. Chang, “John Flavel,” 24.

47. Kelly, “Flavell, John.” Cosby has Geare’s death occurring four months after Flavel’s arrival, but this seems to be a miscopy of Flavel’s anonymous biography, which states that it was four months after Black Bartholomew Day. See Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life*, 17; “Life of the Late,” vi–vii.

48. Kelly, “Flavell, John.”

49. Concerning this Code and its name, Coffey writes, “The Cavalier Parliament’s laws against Dissent became known in the nineteenth century as the Clarendon Code. This is something of a misnomer, since Sir Edward Hyde, the Earl of Clarendon, was not the mastermind behind the legislation, and historians are divided over his attitude towards it.” Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689*, Studies in Modern History (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 167–68.

50. Technically, the beginning of the Clarendon Code was the passing of the Corporation Act in the preceding December, in 1661, which all but removed Puritans from public office. See Coffey, *Persecution*, 168.

51. Winship, Michael P., *Hot Protestants: A History of Puritanism in England and America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018), 205. The reasoning for such strong language is due to this Act’s requirement that Puritan ministers were to be “episcopally ordained, to renounce the Solemn League and Covenant and to assent to

by puritans as ‘Black Bartholomew’s Day,’ when the ancient feast of Saint Bartholomew was marked by the emptying out of the Church of England’s puritan ministry.”⁵² Though stripped of his position, Flavel remained in Dartmouth, staying close to his congregation and serving a small Puritan school.⁵³ He continued to take every opportunity to teach and preach to his congregation.⁵⁴

It was not until the passing of the Oxford Act (or Five-Mile Act) that Flavel was forced to move from Dartmouth to nearby Slapton. According to Winship, this act banned ministers “from coming within five miles of any town of any place where they had ministered unless they had taken an extremely harsh oath of loyalty.”⁵⁵ Despite the government’s attempts to curb the influence of Puritan ministers, Flavel continued to serve among his congregation. Members gathered to hear him preach whenever and wherever opportunity allowed. One of their favorite spots to convene was called Saltstone. Located in the Kingsbridge estuary, this strip of land was only accessible at low tide.⁵⁶ At times, Flavel disguised himself as a woman in order to meet with his people undetected. On one occasion, he plunged his horse into the sea to escape authorities.⁵⁷ As Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson write, “Once, soldiers rushed in and dispersed the congregation. Several of the fugitives were apprehended and fined, but the remainder brought Flavel to another wooded area where he continued his sermon.”⁵⁸ Such was Flavel’s fortitude. Amid persecution, he exemplified the resolve of an English Puritan minister, and honored his father’s legacy.⁵⁹

the new Prayer Book.” Coffey, *Persecution*, 168. Such demands were simply too much for the majority of Puritans.

52. Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 206.

53. Kelly, “Flavell, John.”

54. “Life of the Late,” 1:vi.

55. Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 210.

56. Calamy and Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, 200.

57. Kelly, “Flavell, John.”

58. Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, 247.

59. See Coffey, *Persecution*, 177. Coffey writes about such Puritan resolves, explaining, “Instead of fleeing, however, Dissenters generally chose to stay put and face up to persecution. The longing for theocracy had been displaced by a sense that tribulation was the lot of the godly” (177). While Dissenters included a larger swath than the Puritans, this statement can certainly be applied to the smaller Puritan group.

The constant need to flee and hide continued until Charles II issued a Declaration of Indulgence in 1672. With this new freedom, Flavel returned to Dartmouth and received ordination as a Congregational minister.⁶⁰ This time of peace was short-lived, however, as the Indulgence was struck down within the year.⁶¹ Flavel (and his fellow Puritan ministers) experienced another fifteen years of persecution, with some of the worst moments occurring during this period. For Flavel, though his ministry continued amid the struggle, this period would prove to be his most productive as a writer, according to James Kelly:

Over the next ten years he published *A Token for Mourners* (1674), *The Seaman's Companion* (1676), *Divine Conduct* (1678), *Sea Deliverances* (c. 1679), *The Touchstone of Sincerity* (1679), *The Method of Grace* (1681), *Navigation Spiritualized* (1682), *A Saint Indeed* (1684), and *Treatise on the Soul of Man* (1685).⁶²

Flavel's family life seemed to echo these same highs and lows, as he lost his second wife early in this period, married his third wife, Agnes Downe, and later buried her in 1684, after she had given him two more sons.⁶³

The worst persecution of this period occurred in the early 1680s. Coffey notes, "Between 1681 and 1686, Dissenters were to face persecution worse than anything they had previously encountered since the early 1660s, the other period when they had been seen as a genuine political threat."⁶⁴ During this time, Flavel was exiled to London. It

60. Chang, "John Flavel," 32. It is important not to make too much of this apparent transition, as C. E. Whiting explains: "After 1662 the distinction between the Presbyterians and the Independents necessarily ceased to be very sharp.... In the Indulgence licenses of 1672 it sometimes happens that the same minister is described as a Presbyterian in one place and a Congregationalist in another, or a Presbyterian is stated to have been licensed for a Congregational meeting-house." See C. E. Whiting, *Studies in English Puritanism from the Restoration to the Revolution, 1660–1688* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 62–63.

61. Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 218.

62. Kelly, "Flavell, John." Parker's research disputes the dates of Flavel's *Navigation Spiritualized* and *A Saint Indeed*. He believes both were written much earlier. Parker, "Proselytisation," 296–315. Parker notes some other works written during these decades, which still demonstrate Flavel's increased output in this period of persecution.

63. Chang, "John Flavel," 31.

64. Coffey, *Persecution*, 173.

was also during this time that he married for a fourth and final time—this time to Dorothy Jeffries.⁶⁵ Returning to Dartmouth in late 1684, he resumed his ministry and remained there (despite multiple offers to minister in London) until his death.

When James II ascended the throne in 1687, he issued a Declaration of Indulgence. It provided Flavel with the freedom to minister. This continued for the rest of his life. Cosby explains,

From that point on, Flavel was allowed to preach without state persecution and enjoyed a fruitful ministry until his death—preaching twice each Lord’s Day, lecturing each Wednesday, and preaching on the Thursday before administering the Lord’s Supper. His congregation built a large church upon his return to the pulpit in Dartmouth.⁶⁶

While on his way to speak at an assembly of ministers on June 21, 1691, Flavel suffered a significant stroke, and died later that night.⁶⁷ His anonymous biographer notes that among his last words were these: “I know that it will be well with me.”⁶⁸

In this brief overview of his life and ministry, it is evident that Flavel was indeed a Puritan’s Puritan. He was a devoted pastor, prolific author, and skilled preacher. Yet, as Embry notes, “Unlike other Puritans such as Richard Sibbes, Thomas Goodwin, or John Owen, whose theologies are better known today, little is known about Flavel’s ministry and theology.”⁶⁹ Such an oversight is unfortunate; for, as Sinclair Ferguson states, “Flavel illustrated the Puritan vision of the godly minister and the faithful preacher.”⁷⁰ But Flavel also experienced much pain and persecution throughout his life. And yet, in the midst of it all, he had great joy in Christ. This joy flowed from his certainty in Christ’s work on

65. There seems to be some confusion as to when and where this marriage took place. Chang has it occurring while Flavel was still in London, as does Flavel’s anonymous biographer. See Chang, “John Flavel,” 33; “Life of the Late,” ix. Kelly has it happening just after Flavel’s return to Dartmouth. See Kelly, “Flavell, John.”

66. Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life*, 20.

67. Kelly, “Flavell, John.”

68. “Life of the Late,” 1: xv.

69. Embry, *Keeper*, 3.

70. Kelly M. Kopic and Randall C. Gleason, eds., *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 212.

his behalf and his standing in Christ, seen even in his last words noted above, “I know that it will be well with me.”⁷¹ It is no surprise that Flavel once wrote in his diary, “to make sure of eternal life is the great business which the sons of death have to do in this world.”⁷² This was an essential concern of Flavel’s life and ministry, for he believed that this business held in its grasp the deepest joy of this life. It was this joy of assurance that formed the essence and expression of his spirituality.

71. “Life of the Late,” 1:xv.

72. Chang, “John Flavel,” 37.