

**CHRIST AND HIS
THREEFOLD OFFICE**

CHRIST AND HIS THREEFOLD OFFICE

John Flavel

Abridged by
J. Stephen Yuille



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Christ and His Threefold Office

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Preface

“One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple.... Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice: have mercy also upon me, and answer me. When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek” (Ps. 27:4, 7–8).

God created us in His image so that we might know and enjoy Him, but we broke away from Him and have lived with the isolation ever since. Mercifully, however, the story does not end there. The Son of God has drawn near to us in the incarnation. He came so close as to experience life in a fallen world, bear our sin and shame, and taste death for us. He was bruised, that we might be healed; humiliated, that we might be exalted; condemned, that we might be justified. At that moment of utter darkness and forsakenness on the cross, He purchased the enjoyment of God for us. In Christ, we now enjoy communion with God. In Christ, we “behold the beauty of the LORD.”

This motif captured the attention of seventeenth-century English Puritan John Flavel.¹ The Holy Spirit led Flavel to a saving knowledge of Christ when he was a young man. Reflecting on his experience, he penned, “I studied to know many other things, but I knew not myself.... My body, which is but the garment of my soul, I kept and nourished with excessive care; but my soul was long forgotten, and had been lost forever...had not God roused it, by the convictions of His Spirit, out of that deep oblivion and deadly slumber.”²

Flavel studied at University College in Oxford. After graduation, at age twenty-three, he entered his first pastorate at Diptford in the county of Devon. Six years later, he moved

1. For details of Flavel’s life, see *The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Minister of Dartmouth*, in John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel* (London: W. Baynes and Son, 1820; repr., London: Banner of Truth, 1968), 1:i–xvi; and *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. S. Lee (London: Smith, Elder, 1909). Flavel is the subject of the following PhD dissertations: Kawi Chang, “John Flavel of Dartmouth, 1630–1691” (University of Edinburgh, 1952); John Thomas Jr., “An Analysis of the Use of Application in the Preaching of John Flavel” (New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007); Brian H. Cosby, “The Theology of Suffering and Sovereignty as Seen in the Writings and Ministry of John Flavel, c. 1630–1691” (Australian College of Theology, 2012); Nathan Thomas Parker, “Proselytization and Apocalypticism in the British Atlantic World—The Theology of John Flavel” (Durham University, 2013). In addition to these dissertations, there are several books on Flavel: 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, 2011); J. Stephen Yuille, *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel’s Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2007); Brian H. Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life and Thought in Stuart England* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2014); Clifford B. Boone, *Puritan Evangelism: Preaching for Conversion in Late-Seventeenth Century English Puritanism as Seen in the Works of John Flavel* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2013).

2. Flavel, *Works*, 2:483–84.

to Dartmouth in the same county. He was a prolific preacher and writer (his collected works fill six volumes), and his pastoral influence extended well beyond his local congregation. He was “famous among the writers of his age,”³ obtaining “more disciples” than John Owen or Richard Baxter.⁴ The story is told of a young man who entered a London bookshop in search of plays. He was offended when the owner offered him a book by John Flavel. Incensed, he threatened to burn it. The owner eventually convinced the young man to take it. A month later he returned, exclaiming, “Sir, I most heartily thank you for putting this book into my hands. I bless God who moved you to do it, for it has saved my soul. Blessed be God, that I ever came into your shop!”⁵

Regrettably, Flavel’s public ministry ceased for a time with the issuing of the Act of Uniformity in 1662.⁶ For several years he continued to live in Dartmouth, meeting secretly with church members in order to preach the Scriptures and administer the sacraments. When the Oxford Act prohibited all nonconformist ministers from living within five miles of towns that sent representatives to Parliament, Flavel settled

3. John Galpine, “A Short Life of John Flavel,” in *Flavel, the Quaker, and the Crown* (Cambridge: Rhwymbooks, 2000), 13.

4. 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, and Harding, 1820), 4:323.

5. Flavel, *Works*, 1:xiv.

6. In 1662, Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity, according to which all who had not received Episcopal ordination had to be reordained by bishops. In addition, ministers had to declare their consent to the entire Book of Common Prayer and their rejection of the Solemn League and Covenant. As a result, approximately two thousand ministers left the Church of England. They became known as “dissenters” or “nonconformists.”

at a nearby village. His people ventured to hear him preach on the Lord's Day in private homes or wooded areas, and he slipped regularly into Dartmouth to visit them. One of their favorite places to gather was located on the Kingsbridge estuary, which was accessible during low tide.⁷ This clandestine ministry continued until the political indulgence of 1687, when the authorities permitted him to resume his public ministry. He enjoyed this liberty until his death four years later at age sixty-four.

Flavel's influence continued after his death. Increase Mather notes 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."⁸ His influence not only crossed oceans but spanned generations. Jonathan Edwards frequently quoted Flavel in his famous work *The Religious Affections*, and George Whitefield carried Flavel's works with him in his travels.⁹

At times Flavel is polemical and controversial in his writings.¹⁰ More often than not, however, he is doctrinal and pastoral. This emphasis is seen in his twofold approach to preaching and writing: exposition and application. Flavel repeatedly follows this simple method, deriving his doctrines

7. A. G. Matthews and Edmund Calamy, *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), 200.

8. Flavel, *Works*, 4:16.

9. Quoted in Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1971), 143.

10. This is evident, for example, in his treatises on antinomianism. See Flavel, *Works*, 3:413-591.

from Scripture and then encouraging his readers to pursue a heartfelt application of those doctrines to all of life. This *affective* theology places Flavel firmly within the realm of English Puritanism—what J. I. Packer calls “a spiritual movement, passionately concerned with God and godliness.”¹¹

Flavel’s passion for God and godliness is particularly evident in the attention he gives to cultivating communion with God. He explains that there is such a thing as *positional* communion: “Thou art near, O LORD” (Ps. 119:151). The psalmist is not speaking here of God’s presence of *essence*; that is, he does not suggest God is in some places more than others. On the contrary, God is present in all places at all times: “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there” (Ps. 139:7–8). So what does the psalmist mean when he says, “Thou art near, O LORD”? He is referring to God’s *gracious* presence—a privilege that belongs exclusively to His people.

Believers enjoy this nearness to God because of our union with Christ.¹² In Scripture, this *positional communion* is called *koinonia* (fellowship, partnership, participation). “God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9).

We are in fellowship (partnership/communion) with Christ’s person. “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which

11. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990), 28.

12. For a full treatment of Flavel’s understanding of union with Christ, see Yuille, *Inner Sanctum*.

we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16). Here Paul is speaking of the Lord’s Supper. We participate in the blood of Christ when we bless the cup, and we participate in the body of Christ when we break the bread. This does not mean we physically drink Christ’s blood and eat Christ’s body. When Paul says we participate in the blood and body of Christ, he means we are one with Him by the Holy Spirit.

We are also in fellowship (partnership/communion) with Christ’s benefits. “But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). We are one with Christ in His death and resurrection; therefore, we commune with Him in the fruits and benefits of His mediatorial work. This means, for example, that we have fellowship with His obedience (Rom. 8:1), His Spirit (Rom. 8:9–11), His Sonship (Rom. 8:14–16), His glory (Rom. 8:17), His suffering (Rom. 8:17), and His intercession (Rom. 8:34).

Positional communion is a tremendous encouragement to all believers because it speaks of our identity in Christ. It reminds us that we possess all things in Him. “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

In addition to this *positional* communion, there is—in Flavel’s estimation—*actual* communion. As established above, God is always near to His people in Christ. This is God’s gracious presence with us. But James declares, “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you” (James 4:8). James does not deny the reality of *positional* communion but points to our

experience of it. We must actively draw near to God, whereby He draws near to us. There are times when we feel God's presence, when He awakens those *graces* (e.g., faith, hope, love, joy) that He implanted in us at regeneration. By means of His Word and Spirit, He stirs these graces so that we know experientially that He is near. This is *actual* communion.

Christ declares, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). Flavel believes that Christ is speaking of *positional* communion (union with Him) when He says, "I will come in to him, and will sup with him," whereas He is speaking of *actual* communion when He says, "and he with me."¹³ As Flavel makes clear, "We can have no actual communion with the Father, Son, or Spirit, till we are first brought into a state of communion."¹⁴ He adds, "All communion is founded in union; and where there is no union, there can be no communion."

Flavel defines *actual* communion as "a spiritual correspondence between Christ and the soul" as "God lets forth influences upon our souls, and we, by the assistance of His Spirit, make returns again unto Him."¹⁵ But what exactly does it look like?¹⁶

God lets forth His greatness upon us, and we make returns in humility. "When I consider thy heavens, the work

13. These insights are gleaned from Flavel's treatise *England's Duty under the Present Gospel Liberty* (1689), in Flavel, *Works*, vol. 4. It consists of eleven sermons based on Revelation 3:20.

14. Flavel, *Works*, 4:237.

15. Flavel, *Works*, 4:240.

16. Flavel, *Works*, 4:240–45.

of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" (Ps. 8:3–4). We are humbled (our "returns") in response to God's greatness (His "influences"). In response to our humbling, God lifts us up: "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (James 4:10).

God lets forth His holiness upon us, and we make returns in repentance. "And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.... Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:3, 5). We repent (our "returns") in response to God's holiness (His "influences"). In response to our repentance, God imparts peace: "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin" (Ps. 32:5).

God lets forth His goodness upon us, and we make returns in love. "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting" (1 Tim. 1:15–16). We love (our "returns") in response to God's goodness (His "influences"). In response, God imparts love: "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him" (John 14:21).

God lets forth His faithfulness upon us, and we make returns in faith. “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Heb. 13:5–6). We trust (our “returns”) in response to God’s faithfulness (His “influences”). In response to our trust, God imparts comfort: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?... Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident” (Ps. 27:1, 3).

These are examples of *actual* communion. In each instance, God communicates Himself to our souls (by means of His Word) so that we make returns to Him. These returns include the stirring of our affections: love, desire, delight, fear, sorrow, trust, and hope. When these affections are directed toward God, we draw near to Him and He draws near to us, meaning we enjoy *actual* communion with God. According to Flavel, this is “a felt presence of God which no words can make another to understand.” We “feel that fountain flowing abundantly into the dry pits, the heart fills apace, the empty thoughts swell with a fullness of spiritual things, which strive for vent.”¹⁷

We cultivate such communion with God by means of “the duties of religion”—praying, hearing the Word, and celebrating the sacraments.¹⁸ By these duties the Holy Spirit “influences the graces” of God’s people so that we “return the

17. Flavel, *Works*, 6:389.

18. Flavel, *Works*, 4:244.

fruits thereof in some measure to Him.” These duties bring us into vital contact with the nature and works of God as revealed in Scripture.¹⁹ More to the point, they bring us to Jesus Christ. Flavel declares, “Look on Him in what respect or particular you will; cast your eye upon this lovely object, and view Him in anyway; turn Him in your serious thoughts which way you will; consider His person, His offices, His works, or any other thing belonging to Him; you will find Him altogether lovely.”²⁰ For starters, Christ is altogether lovely in His *person*: “The wonderful union and perfection of the divine and human nature in Christ, render Him an object of admiration and adoration to angels and men.” Second, Christ is altogether lovely in His *offices*: “All the promises of illumination, counsel and direction flow out of the prophetic office. All the promises of reconciliation, peace, pardon, and acceptance flow out of the priestly office. All the promises of converting, increasing, defending, directing, and supplying grace flow out of the kingly office.” Finally, Christ is altogether lovely in His *relations*. As redeemer, He delivers us from the depths of misery. As bridegroom, He unites us to Himself—we who are “deformed, defiled, and altogether unworthy.” As advocate, He “pleads” our cause in heaven and “appears” for us in the presence of God.²¹

As we gaze on Christ’s loveliness, we behold God’s goodness, faithfulness, lovingkindness, holiness, and so on. The Holy Spirit lets forth these influences on our souls, and we make returns as our affections are stirred. For Flavel, this is

19. Flavel, *Works*, 4:240.

20. Flavel, *Works*, 2:215.

21. Flavel, *Works*, 2:218–22.

actual communion—“the life of our life, the joy of our hearts; a heaven upon earth.”²²

This communion by means of meditation on Christ’s loveliness brings us to the present work: *Christ and His Threefold Office*.²³ Flavel sees the salvation of God’s people as resting on the eternal covenant of redemption between God the Father and God the Son. In eternity, the Father and Son enter into a transaction to bring about the salvation of the elect. In time, the Son becomes a man, fulfills the covenant of works, and dies to pay the penalty incurred by His people under that covenant. Having done so, He returns to the Father, from where He sends forth the Holy Spirit to unite His people to Himself. By virtue of that union, they partake of the blessings of the covenant of grace.

In Flavel’s mind, therefore, the fulfillment of the covenant of redemption is linked to two great unions.²⁴ The first is the hypostatical union between the divine and human natures in Christ, whereas the second is the mystical union between Christ and believers by means of the Holy Spirit. Flavel affirms that the first is the basis for the second. In other words, Christ must become one with us hypostatically in order for us to become one with Him mystically. Suffice it to say, Flavel believes that Christ “took or assumed the true human nature...into the unity of His divine person, with all its integral parts and essential properties; and so was made

22. Flavel, *Works*, 4:250.

23. This book abridges the first half of *The Fountain of Life*. Found in Flavel, *Works*, vol. 1, the original work is a collection of more than forty sermons, celebrating Christ from His preincarnate glory to His postresurrection glory.

24. Flavel, *Works*, 1:75.

(or, became) a true and real man by that assumption.”²⁵ He believes that God the Son became a man “to qualify and prepare Him for a full discharge of His mediatorship, in the office of our prophet, priest, and king.”²⁶

Christ fulfills His prophetic office by “revelation” and “illumination,”²⁷ His priestly office by “oblation” and “intercession,”²⁸ and His kingly office by “subjection” and “governance.”²⁹ “Salvation,” says Flavel, “is revealed by Christ as a prophet, procured by Him as a priest, applied by Him as a king. In vain it is revealed, if not purchased; in vain revealed and purchased, if not applied.”³⁰ Again, he remarks, “What Christ revealed as a prophet, He purchased as a priest; and what He revealed and purchased as a prophet and priest, He applies as a king.”³¹ Christ discharges His mediatorship as God-man in these three offices in order to secure the blessings that He lavishes on all those who are united with Him by the Holy Spirit.

The glory of Christ’s threefold mediatorial office is the theme of this volume. Flavel’s treatment of the subject is informed by Scripture and faithful to the historic creeds of the church. He is polemical when necessary and painstakingly detailed when he believes the truth is at stake. That said, his work does not fall within the traditional boundaries of systematic theology; rather, it is an act of adoration,

25. Flavel, *Works*, 1:73.

26. Flavel, *Works*, 1:80; see also 4:182–86.

27. Flavel, *Works*, 1:137.

28. Flavel, *Works*, 1:80.

29. Flavel, *Works*, 1:80.

30. Flavel, *Works*, 1:143.

31. Flavel, *Works*, 1:198–99.

constituting a series of meditations on “the transcendent excellency of Jesus Christ.”³² Above all else, Flavel wants us to “behold the beauty of the LORD,” that we might enjoy communion with the living God. This, therefore, is how we are to read his work—thoughtfully, devotionally, and affectively. Our reading must be shaped by Flavel’s own counsel to us: “To your work, Christian, to your work.... Whatever communion God and the soul maintains, it is in this way. Count all, therefore, but dross in comparison to that excellency which is the knowledge of Jesus Christ.”³³

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32. Flavel, *Works*, 1:xvii.

33. Flavel, *Works*, 1:42.