

John Flavel



John Flavel (1627–1691)

Engraving from an original picture
in Dr. Williams's Library

“An Honest, Well Experienced Heart”

The Piety of John Flavel

Introduced and Edited by
Adam Embry



Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan

“An Honest, Well Experienced Heart”

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Reformation Heritage Books

2965 Leonard St. NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49525

616-977-0889 / Fax 616-285-3246

orders@heritagebooks.org

www.heritagebooks.org

Printed in the United States of America

12 13 14 15 16 17/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Flavel, John, 1630?-1691.

“An honest, well experienced heart” : the piety of John Flavel / introduced and edited by Adam Embry.

p. cm. — (Profiles in Reformed spirituality)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-60178-183-3 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Piety. 2. Puritans—England—Doctrines. I. Embry, Adam. II. Title.

BV4647.P5F53 2012

248.4'852—dc23

2012021427

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*To my wife,
Charlotte,
and our children,
for their love and support*

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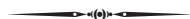
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Profiles in Reformed Spirituality

Charles Dickens's famous line in *A Tale of Two Cities*—"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"—seems well suited to western evangelicalism since the 1960s. On the one hand, these decades have seen much for which to praise God and to rejoice. In His goodness and grace, for instance, Reformed truth is no longer a house under siege. Growing numbers identify themselves theologically with what we hold to be biblical truth, namely, Reformed theology and piety. And yet, as an increasing number of Reformed authors have noted, there are many sectors of the surrounding western evangelicalism that are characterized by great shallowness and a trivialization of the weighty things of God. So much of evangelical worship seems barren. And when it comes to spirituality, there is little evidence of the riches of our heritage as Reformed evangelicals.

As it was at the time of the Reformation, when the watchword was *ad fontes*—"back to the sources"—so it is now: The way forward is backward. We need to go back to the spiritual heritage of Reformed evangelicalism to find the pathway forward. We cannot live in the past; to attempt to do so would be antiquarianism. But our Reformed forebearers in the faith can teach us much about Christianity, its doctrines, its passions, and its fruit.

And they can serve as our role models. As R. C. Sproul has noted of such giants as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards: “These men all were conquered, overwhelmed, and spiritually intoxicated by their vision of the holiness of God. Their minds and imaginations were captured by the majesty of God the Father. Each of them possessed a profound affection for the sweetness and excellence of Christ. There was in each of them a singular and unswerving loyalty to Christ that spoke of a citizenship in heaven that was always more precious to them than the applause of men.”¹

To be sure, we would not dream of placing these men and their writings alongside the Word of God. John Jewel (1522–1571), the Anglican apologist, once stated: “What say we of the fathers, Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Cyprian?... They were learned men, and learned fathers; the instruments of the mercy of God, and vessels full of grace. We despise them not, we read them, we reverence them, and give thanks unto God for them. Yet...we may not make them the foundation and warrant of our conscience: we may not put our trust in them. Our trust is in the name of the Lord.”²

Seeking, then, both to honor the past and yet not idolize it, we are issuing these books in the series *Profiles in Reformed Spirituality*. The design is to introduce the spirituality and piety of the Reformed

1. R. C. Sproul, “An Invaluable Heritage,” *Tabletalk* 23, no. 10 (October 1999): 5–6.

2. Cited in Barrington R. White, “Why Bother with History?” *Baptist History and Heritage* 4, no. 2 (July 1969): 85.

tradition by presenting descriptions of the lives of notable Christians with select passages from their works. This combination of biographical sketches and collected portions from primary sources gives a taste of the subjects' contributions to our spiritual heritage and some direction as to how the reader can find further edification through their works. It is the hope of the publishers that this series will provide riches for those areas where we are poor and light of day where we are stumbling in the deepening twilight.

—Joel R. Beeke
Michael A. G. Haykin

Acknowledgments

In my 1813 edition of Flavel's *Keeping the Heart*, the professors of Andover Theological Seminary wrote, "The works of the Rev. John Flavel have been greatly useful to the church of Christ in England and America.... It is appropriate to the present season of coldness and indifference on the part of many professors of religion and contains much that is important to all classes of Christians." That two-hundred-year-old statement agrees with the purposes behind the Reformation Heritage Books Profiles in Reformed Spirituality series. For this reason, I extend gratitude to Dr. Joel Beeke and Dr. Michael Haykin, the series editors of this book, for including John Flavel in the series. Dr. Beeke's and Dr. Haykin's writings on church history and biblical spirituality have helped me love Christ more. I am also thankful for the labors of the team at Reformation Heritage Books, Jay Collier and Annette Gysen. Both were efficient and encouraging in seeing this book to print.

A group of Puritan and Flavel students also deserve my appreciation. Dr. Stephen Yuille graciously reviewed the introduction. He has written on Flavel, among other Puritans, and his writings are worth your time reading. I've enjoyed beneficial

conversations with Brian Cosby and Nathan Parker, both doctoral students studying Flavel. Expect to see excellent pastoral scholarship on Flavel from them in the future. My supervisor and friend at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Shawn Wright, deserves my thanks for first teaching me Puritan history and theology.

The church I serve, Auburndale Baptist, deserves my appreciation for their willingness to hear so many Flavel quotes in my sermons! This is a church that has furnished my office wall with a portrait of Flavel and my bookshelf with a 1700 edition of Flavel’s *Fountain of Life*. I am truly a blessed pastor to serve such a loving and thoughtful people.

My parents purchased a copy of *The Works of John Flavel* for my seminary education. Those volumes have given me instruction in godliness and pastoral ministry, so I am also indebted to John Flavel and his ministry.

I am most thankful for my wife, Charlotte Ann, and her encouragement as I have learned theology and pastoral ministry from Flavel. She has been patient with me as I have read and studied Flavel for the past few years. She is to me “a good wife being... the best companion...the fittest and readiest assistant in work...and the greatest grace and honor that can be, to him that hath her.”¹

Adam Embry
Louisville, Kentucky

1. Thomas Gataker, *A Good Wife God's Gift* (London, 1637), 166.

*Note of interest: The engraving at the end of most selections is attributed to Sir Walter Raleigh's *The Sea-Mans Triumph, Declaring the Honorable Actions of Such Gentlemen Captains and Sailors...Lately Brought to Dartmouth* (London, 1592).*



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.

—A church member under Flavel's ministry



John Flavel

The Piety of John Flavel (1627–1691)



Early in the 1670s, a gentleman entered Mr. Boulter's London bookshop in search of literary plays. Having none in inventory, Boulter seized the opportunity to show him a theological work titled *Keeping the Heart*.¹ Examining the title, the gentleman exclaimed, "What a damnable fanatic was he who made this book!" He mockingly offered to buy it, if only to burn it. Boulter stood undeterred by his recommendation. Reluctantly, the gentleman finally promised to read it. A month later, he returned to the bookshop in a far more somber mood, admitting to Boulter, "Sir, I most heartily thank you for putting this book into my hand; I bless God that moved you to do it, it hath

1. This book is also titled *A Saint Indeed; or, The Great Work of a Christian Explained and Pressed from Proverbs 4:23* (London, 1671). "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). This work was first published in 1668. Later reprints came out of London in 1670, 1671, 1673, 1675, 1677, 1680, 1682, 1684, 1689, 1698, 1701, 1729, 1768, and 1796. Flavel's book was published at Edinburgh in 1696 and 1789, Belfast in 1743, Glasgow in 1754, and Mullingar in 1799. In the American colonies, the book was published in 1726 (Boston); 1795 (Amherst, N.H.); 1801 (New Brunswick, N.J.); 1813 and 1815 (Boston); 1817 (Hartford, Conn.), and 1819 (Boston). The numerous republications of *A Saint Indeed / Keeping the Heart* show its spiritual usefulness throughout Old and New England.

2 “An Honest, Well Experienced Heart”

saved my soul; blessed be God that ever I came into your shop.” He then purchased a hundred copies to distribute among the poor.²

Who wrote this life-changing book? The author was John Flavel. Born at Worcestershire in 1627, Flavel was part of a family steeped in Puritan piety.³ In later years, he affectionately remembered his father, Richard, as “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.”⁴ Flavel initially had little interest in Christianity, despite this godly upbringing. “I was carried away,” he remembered, “so many years in the course

2. “Thus it pleased God to bless the sermons, discourses and writings of Mr. Flavel.” *The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Minister of Dartmouth*, in *The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 1:xiv. No author is named for Flavel’s *Memoir* in his works; however, John Quick is the author of the memoir. Quick’s *Icones Sacrae Anglicanae* contains a biographical sketch of Flavel similar to the one contained in Flavel’s works. “The only extant biography of any appreciable length is by John Quick.” See Kwai Sing Chang, “John Flavel of Dartmouth, 1630–1691” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1952).

3. According to Flavel, godly families are “of special consideration, both as to our temporal and eternal good: For whether the families in which we grow up were great or small in Israel; whether our parents were of a higher or lower class and rank among men, yet if they were such as feared God, and wrought righteousness, if they took any care to educate you righteously, and trained you up ‘in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,’ you are bound to reckon it among your chief mercies.” *Divine Conduct; or, The Mystery of Providence: A Treatise upon Psalm 57:2*, in *The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 4:370.

4. John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life: A Display of Christ in His Essential and Mediatorial Glory: 42 Sermons*, in *The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 1:257.

of this world.... I studied to know many other things, but I knew not myself.”⁵ Yet, at some point during Flavel’s youth, the Holy Spirit led him to Christ. Flavel describes this transformation as follows:

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 for ever, as others daily are, had not God roused it, by the convictions of his Spirit, out of that deep oblivion and deadly slumber. When the God that formed it, out of free grace to the work of his own hands, had thus recovered it to a sense of its own worth and danger, my next work was to get it united with Christ, and thereby secured from the wrath to come.⁶

Flavel completed grammar school and followed in his brother Phineas’s footsteps, enrolling at Oxford University, where he excelled at his studies. Upon graduation in 1650, he accepted the position of assistant minister at a church in Diptford, Devon. The minister died a short time later, so Flavel assumed full responsibility of the ministry. He possessed a clear appreciation for his pastoral duties: “The scope and end of the ministry is for the church’s benefit and advantage.”⁷ He also desired to know the spiritual state of his flock, stating, “A prudent minister will study the souls of his people, more than the best

5. John Flavel, *Pneumatologia: A Treatise of the Soul of Man*, in *The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 2:483.

6. Flavel, *Treatise of the Soul of Man*, 2:483–84.

7. John Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized: The Heavenly Use of Earthly Things*, in *The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 5:21.

human books in his library; and not choose what is easiest for him, but what is most necessary for them.”⁸ In addition, Flavel understood his own need for spiritual growth as a pastor, often saying, “All our reading, studying, and preaching, is but trifling hypocrisy, till the things read, studied, and preached, be felt in some degree upon our own hearts.”⁹

Ministry in Dartmouth

In 1656, Flavel moved to the southwest seaport town of Dartmouth,¹⁰ where he assisted Allan Geare at St. Savior’s and St. Clement’s, preaching on Sundays and lecturing on Wednesdays.¹¹ Six years later, in 1662, the Church of England imposed the Clarendon Code, which restricted nonconformist activity among civil rulers, laypeople, and church ministers.

8. John Flavel, *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor, Drawn by Christ*, in *The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 6:571.

9. Flavel, *Complete Evangelical Pastor*, 6:568. It was known that “being assiduous in reading, meditation and prayer, he increased in ministerial knowledge daily so that he attained to a high degree of eminency and reputation for his useful labours in the church.” *Life of Flavel*, 1:iv.

10. The church at Dartmouth had considered John Howe as a possible pastor. However, he became one of Oliver Cromwell’s chaplains and later ministered in the Great Torrington church. Edward Windeatt, “John Flavell: A Notable Dartmouth Puritan and His Bibliography,” in *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature, and Art* 43 (1911): 3–5.

11. Prior to this move, Flavel’s wife, Joan Randall, died while giving birth in 1655, and the child died as well. Flavel later married Elizabeth Stapell, who died around 1672. Soon after, he married Agnes Downes, who passed away around 1684. Finally, Flavel married Dorothy Jefferies. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Flavell, John.”



St. Savior's Church, Dartmouth

As a result, both Geare and Flavel were ejected from the church. Neither this nor Geare's sudden death discouraged Flavel from continuing to minister to his people. He supplemented his income by teaching at a Latin school along with a fellow minister, James Burdwood, who later published a sermon from Flavel on how Christians test their hearts for signs of godliness.¹² This ministry continued for three years, until 1665 and the enforcement of the Five Mile Act. As the name suggests, this act required nonconformist ministers to stay five miles away from their churches. As a result, Flavel moved to nearby Slapton. Still, he remained devoted to his people, visiting them whenever possible and producing a number of books for their spiritual benefit.¹³

These years were exceedingly difficult for nonconformist ministers. The vast majority of them, however, remained committed to preaching the gospel and cultivating godliness among their people. As John Coffey observes, “Instead of fleeing...dissenters generally chose to stay put and face up to persecution. The longing for a theocracy had been displaced by a sense that tribulation was the lot of the godly.”¹⁴ That is certainly true of Flavel. According to the earliest biographical account of his life, “he

12. Windeatt, “John Flavell,” 7. See selection 44.

13. Around this time, he wrote *Navigation Spiritualized* and *Husbandry Spiritualized*. These works spiritualize sailing and farming. This is a common genre among the Puritans, but as Dewey Wallace remarks, “The master at the art of spiritualizing the creatures...was John Flavel.” *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans: An Anthology* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University, 1987), xxx.

14. John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689* (Essex: Pearson Education, 2000), 177.

thought the souls of his flock to be more precious than to be so tamely neglected. He took all opportunities of ministering the Word and Sacraments to them in private meetings, and joined with other ministers in solemn days of fasting and humiliation, to pray that God would once more restore the ark of his covenant unto his afflicted Israel.”¹⁵ Flavel recognized the value of a persecuted ministry. He was convinced that God used it to sanctify him, thus making him a more effective pastor—better able to minister to his people. He explains:

When we could not preach the doctrine of faith, we were reduced, by a blessed necessity, to live the life of faith. The rules of patience, humility, and satisfaction in the will of God, were wont to prescribe from our pulpits to the people, we were necessitated to practice and apply to ourselves in our sad solitudes, and various distresses, through which the Lord hath led us. So that now we come better furnished to the work, than ever before.¹⁶

Imprisonment was a constant threat for non-conformists. Flavel’s parents were imprisoned at Newgate in 1665, where they caught the plague and died upon their release.¹⁷ The risk of arrest followed Flavel and those who met secretly to hear him preach at Barnstaple and Chittlehampton or on the rocks at low tide at the Kingbridge estuary. On one occasion, Flavel disguised himself as a woman to travel

15. *Life of Flavel*, 1:vi.

16. Flavel, *Complete Evangelical Pastor*, 6:584–85.

17. *Life of Flavel*, 1:iv.

undetected to Totnes, where he performed a baptism. On another occasion, he rode his horse into the ocean at Slapton Sands to elude the police. He escaped arrest at a ministerial prayer meeting in London, although his friend and fellow minister, William Jenkyn, was not so fortunate.¹⁸ A respite from persecution finally arrived in 1672, when Charles II issued an indulgence, allowing licensed nonconformist ministers to preach. Along with 163 members of his congregation, Flavel sent a letter to the king, thanking him for religious toleration.¹⁹ Flavel continued to preach and write throughout the remainder of the decade. In the 1680s, however, persecution resumed and intensified.²⁰ Eventually, he was placed under house arrest. As always, he used his circumstances to his pastoral advantage, again publishing his sermons for the benefit of his people.²¹

In 1687, James II issued a Declaration of Indulgence, which nullified all laws and penalties against the nonconformists and permitted them to worship publicly. Within two years, William and Mary ascended the throne and passed the Act of Toleration, which guaranteed religious freedom to

18. *Life of Flavel*, 1:ix.

19. G. Lyon Turner, *Original Records of Early Nonconformity under Religious Persecution and Indulgence* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911), 1:207–9.

20. Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration*, 173.

21. Wallace describes the impact of this literary output among nonconformist ministers: “Thus there ensued a period of great productivity in the creation of a literature of the spiritual life, and a sharpening of the focus of spirituality upon the drama of the individual soul, in the context of the withdrawn and faithful remnant community.” *Spirituality of the Later English Puritans*, xiii–xiv.



Slapton Sands, Devon

nonconformists. Though having a “weak constitution” and “many infirmities,” Flavel resumed his public ministry in a new meeting house built by the church.²² There he preached twice every Lord’s Day and Thursday, lectured every Wednesday, and examined communicants for the Lord’s Supper.²³ According to one account, “When the duty of the [Lord’s Day] was over, he would often complain of a sore breast, an aching head, and a pained back; yet he would be early at study again next Monday.”²⁴ John Galpine describes Flavel’s dedication as follows:

He was in labors more abundant; he did spend himself and was spent in the work of God; as the talents committed to him were more and greater than many of his brethren, so was his diligence in laying them out in his master’s service. He expected not to be courted to his work by earnest importunity, but wheresoever he had any prospect of doing good by his preaching, I never knew him to make excuses or to spare his pains.²⁵

Yet Flavel could not continue at this intense pace indefinitely. On the evening of June 26, 1691, he

22. *Life of Flavel*, 1:viii.

23. Flavel was also involved in ministerial training. In 1691, the Topsham Assembly, a group of Congregationalist and Presbyterian ministers who met for edification and ministerial training, selected Flavel as their moderator. Allan Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter, 1650–1875* (London: Manchester University Press, 1962), 65.

24. *Life of Flavel*, 1:x.

25. John Galpine, “A Short Life of John Flavel,” in *Flavel, the Quaker and the Crown: John Flavel, Clement Lake, and Religious Liberty in 17th Century England* (repr., Cambridge, Mass.: Rhwymbooks, 2000), 13.

experienced numbness in his hands. The effects of the stroke quickly spread to the rest of his body. As his family and friends carried him upstairs, he knew death approached but stated “I know that it will be well with me.”²⁶ A few days later, he was laid to rest in the churchyard at St. Savior’s. His memorial reads as follows:

Could Grace of Learning from the Grave set free
Flavel thou hadst not seen Mortality
Tho’ here thy Dusty Part Death’s victim lies
Thou by thy Works thyself dost Eternize,
Which Death nor Rust of time shall overthrow:
Whilst thou dost reign above, these live below.²⁷

Not long after his death, Flavel became a well-known name on both sides of the Atlantic. In the 1700s, his writings resonated with the preachers of the Great Awakening. Jonathan Edwards, for example, quoted Flavel extensively in both *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival* and *Religious Affections*.²⁸ A woman who was familiar with George Whitefield’s sermons stated that the theology of the “New Lights” was not new at all: “It may be new to such as never saw it before; but it is what I saw fifty

26. *Life of Flavel*, 1:xv.

27. Ray Freeman, *John Flavel: A Famous Dartmouth Puritan* (Dartmouth, U.K.: Dartmouth History Research Group, 2001), 6.

28. Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Awakening*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 4:311–12, and John E. Smith, editor’s introduction to *Religious Affections*, by Jonathan Edwards, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959), 2:60–62.

years ago, from good Mr. Flavel.”²⁹ His writings also had a tremendous influence on Princeton Seminary’s first theology professor, Archibald Alexander (1772–1851), who acknowledged:

I now began to read Flavel for my own instruction in Christian doctrine. This year, 1788–89, was in many respects the most important of my life. If I had not the beginning of a work of grace, my mind was enlightened by the knowledge of the truth, of which I had lived in total ignorance. I began to love the truth, and to seek after it as for hid treasure. To John Flavel I certainly owe more than to any uninspired author.³⁰

Perhaps the most compelling example of the lasting effect of Flavel’s writings is Robert Murray M’Cheyne’s account of a New England farmer named Luke Short, who had lived in Dartmouth at one time and had been converted through Flavel’s sermon on 1 Corinthians 16:22: “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha [accursed].” M’Cheyne explains:

When he was a hundred years old, he was able to work on his farm, and his mind was not at all impaired. He had lived all this time

29. Robert Philip, *The Life and Times of the Reverend George Whitefield* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1838), 154. Mark Noll defines the New Lights as follows: “The New England Congregationalists, Baptists, and Separates who favored the revivals of the 1740s and who usually adopted some form of Jonathan Edwards’ theology.” *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 566.

30. Charles Hodge, “Memoir of Archibald Alexander,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, 27, no. 1 (1855): 145–46.

in carelessness and sin; he was a sinner a hundred years old, and ready to die accursed. One day, as he sat in his field, he busied himself in reflecting on his past life. He thought of the days of his youth. His memory fixed on Mr. Flavel's sermon, a considerable part of which he remembered. The earnestness of the minister, the truths spoken, the effect on the people, all came fresh to his mind. He felt that he had not loved the Lord Jesus; he feared the dreadful anathema; he was deeply convicted of sin, was brought to the blood of sprinkling. He lived to his one hundredth and sixteenth year, giving every evidence of being born again.³¹

Theology of Keeping the Heart

How do we account for the spiritual legacy of Flavel's writings? First, he made much of Christ: "No subject can be more necessary to study, or sweet to experience [than Christ]," for, "all goodness is attractive, how powerfully attractive then must Jesus Christ be, who is the ocean of all goodness, from whom all streams of goodness are derived, and into them all empty themselves?"³² In the words of John Galpine, Flavel was preoccupied with "the glory of God and the good of His church and of the souls of men.... He was well acquainted with the mysteries of the Gospel, and in special with that admirable mystery of

31. Robert Murray M'Cheyne, *The Works of the Late Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne Complete in Two Volumes* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 2:221–22.

32. John Flavel, *The Method of Grace in the Gospel Redemption*, in *The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 2:6.

SECTION ONE



Christ Rules the Heart



A Chart of English Ships by Devonshire
(National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England)

Flavel ministered for some time in the naval city of Dartmouth. Several of his books were written specifically to minister to sailors.



To Win and Gain the Hearts of Sinners

*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 sup with him,
and he with me. —Revelation 3:20*

This text is Christ's wooing voice, full of heavenly rhetoric to win and gain the hearts of sinners to Himself, wherein we have these two general parts....

First, *Christ's suit for a sinner's heart*, wherein we have, first, the solemn preface, ushering it in—"behold"—and, second, the suit itself. The preface is exceedingly solemn, for beside the common use of this word *behold* in other places to excite attention or exaggerate and put weight into an affirmation, it stands here, as a judicious expositor¹ notes, as a term of notification, or public record, wherein Christ takes witness of the most gracious offer He was now about to make to their souls, and will have it stand...as a testimony for or against their souls to all eternity, to cut off all excuses and pretences for time to come.

From *England's Duty*, in *Works*, 4:17–20.

1. The expositor Flavel referenced was the Scottish professor of divinity at Glasgow University, James Durham, and his book, *A Commentarie upon the Book of the Revelation* (London, 1658).

Second, the suit itself, wherein we have the following:

1. The suitor Christ Himself: “I stand.” I that have a right of sovereignty over you; I that have shed My invaluable blood to purchase you and might justly condemn you upon the first denial or demur, “Behold I stand.” This is the Suitor.

2. His posture and action: “I stand at the door and knock.” The word is in the [past] tense (“I have stood”), but being here joined with another verb of the present tense, it is fitly translated “I stand,” yet so as that it notes a continued action. “I have stood and do still stand with unwearied patience; I once stood personally and bodily among you in the days of My flesh, and I still stand spiritually and representatively in my ambassadors at the door, that is, the mind and conscience, the faculties and powers which are introductive into the whole soul.”

The word *door* is here improperly put to signify those introductive faculties of the soul that are of a like use to it, as the door is to the house. This is the Redeemer’s posture—His action is knocking, that is, His powerful efforts and gracious attempts to open the heart to give Him admission. The word *knock* signifies a strong and powerful knock; He stands patiently and knocks powerfully by the Word outwardly, by the convictions, motions, impulses, strivings, and instigations of His Spirit inwardly.

3. The design and end of the suit: it is for opening, that is, consenting, receiving, embracing, and hearty accepting of Him by faith. In Acts 16:14 the Lord

opened the heart of Lydia, that is, persuaded her soul to believe, implying that the heart by nature is strongly barred and locked up against Christ, and nothing but power from Him can open it.

Second, the powerful arguments and motives Christ used to obtain His suit and get a grant from the sinner's heart, and they are drawn from two inestimable benefits accruing to the opening or believing soul.

4. Union—"I will come in to him," that is, I will unite Myself with the opening, believing soul. He shall be mystically one with Me, and I with him.

5. Communion—"I will...sup with him, and he with me"; that is, I will feast the believing soul with the [delicacies] of heaven. Such comforts, such joys, such pleasures as none in the world but believers are capable of.

And to set home all, Christ proposed these special benefits to all sorts of sinners great and small, old and young ("if any man hear my voice, and open the door"), that so no soul might be discouraged from believing by the greatness or multitude of his sins, but the vilest of sinners may see free grace triumphing over all their unworthiness upon their consent to take Christ according to the gracious offers of the gospel.





Shutting up the Heart against Christ

That all hearts are naturally shut and made fast against Christ is a sad but certain truth; we read in John 1:11–12: “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” Christ found the doors of men’s hearts generally shut against Him, except for only a few whose hearts were opened by the almighty power of God in the way of faith (v. 12); these indeed received Him, but all the rest excluded and denied entrance to the Son of God.

Now there is a twofold shutting up of the heart against Jesus Christ. First, a natural one: every soul comes into this world shut up and fast closed against the Lord Jesus. The very will of man that is the freest and most arbitrary faculty comes into the world barred and bolted against Christ: “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). “It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his own good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). This is a dismal effect of the fall: who feels not strong [aversions], violent rebellions, and obstinate resistances in his own

heart when moving toward Christ in the first weak and trembling acts of faith?

Second, here is a judicial shutting up of the heart against Christ. This is a sore and tremendous stroke of God, punishing former rebellions: “Israel would [have] none of me, so I gave them up unto their own hearts’ lusts” (Ps. 81:11–12). This looks like a prelude of damnation, a very near preparation to ruin. “Israel would have none of me”—there’s the natural shutting up of the heart. “So I gave them up”—there’s the judicial shutting up of the heart; they would not hear, they shall not hear. Oh fearful judgment! Thus the Lord gave up the heathens (Rom. 1:26). They had abused their natural light, and now their minds are judicially darkened, given up to a sottish¹ and injudicious mind, not able to distinguish duty from sin, safety from danger; a mind that should elect the worst things, and reprobate the best.... These two closures of the hearts are not always found together, in the same subject, and blessed be God they are not. Christ meets with many a repulse and endures with much patience the gain-sayings of sinners before He pronounces that dreadful sentence upon them: “Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not: Make the heart of this people [dull]” (Isa. 6:9–10).²

1. *sottish*: drunken



The Great Design and Aim of the Gospel

The powerful voice of Christ is the key that opens the door of the soul to receive Him. The opening of the heart to receive Christ is the main design aimed at in all the external and internal administrations of the gospel and Spirit.

The gospel has two great designs and intentions. One is to open the heart of God to men and to show them the everlasting counsels of grace and peace that were hid in God from ages and generations past, that all men may now see that God had been designing and contriving for their happiness in Christ before the world was: “To make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ, to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” (Eph. 3:9).

The next intention and aim of the gospel is to set open the heart of man to receive Jesus Christ, without which all the glorious discoveries of the eternal counsels and gracious contrivances of God

for and about us would signify nothing to our real advantage. Christ standing, knocking, and speaking by His Spirit (of which we have before treated) receive their success and attain their end when the heart opens itself by faith to receive Him, and not till then. Hence, note that the opening of the heart to receive Christ by faith is the great design and aim of the gospel.

Great persons have great designs. This is the glorious project of the great God, and every person in the Godhead is engaged and concerned in it. (1) The Father has His hand in this work, and such a hand as without it no heart could ever open or move in the least towards Christ: "No man can come unto me [Christ says] except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). None but He that raised up Christ from the dead can raise up a dead heart unto saving faith in Him. (2) The Son's hand is in this work; He is not only the object but the author of our faith: "We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life" (1 John 5:20). (3) And then for the Spirit, He comes from heaven designedly and expressly to convince sinners of their need of Christ and beget faith in them, so that this appears to be the great design of heaven (John 16:9).