

# Means to Understanding in John Flavel's "Pneumatologia"

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The Puritan John Flavel deserves more attention.<sup>1</sup> His biblical knowledge, his foundational commitment to religious affections, and persevering character reflect the broader legacy of the Puritans; a legacy summarized by John MacArthur at the end of the recent Puritan conference as a "great core of theology and biblical insight and faithful pastoral application."<sup>2</sup> Recent research has pointed out how Flavel was a biblical theologian concerned with the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit in a person's heart, including through their suffering.<sup>3</sup>

But Flavel also deserves more intent study due to his delight in learning and his ability to teach.<sup>4</sup> He was "humble, godly, and learned."<sup>5</sup> John Murray has pointed out Flavel's conviction that affection could only flow from

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1. Brian H. Cosby, "John Flavel: The 'Lost' Puritan," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3, no. 1 (2011): 113; Iain Murray, "John Flavel," *Banner of Truth*, no. 60 (September 1968): 5.

2. John MacArthur, "The Enduring Legacy of the Puritans," Session 12 of the Puritan Conference held October 5–7, 2022, at Grace Community Church, Los Angeles, California. Video of the Session can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJMle1H05p4>; a transcript of the session can be found at <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/pc22-2/>

3. See as examples, Brian Cosby, *Suffering and Sovereignty: John Flavel and the Puritans on Afflictive Providence* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012); 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); Paul Gibson, "The Humiliation of Christ in the Preaching of John Flavel (1627–1691)" (PhD diss., Edinburgh Theological Seminary, 2022); Stephen Yuille, *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel's doctrine of mystical union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007).

4. "The Life of the late Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Minister of Dartmouth," *The Works of John Flavel* (first published by W. Baynes and Son, 1820; reprinted London: Banner of Truth, 1968), 1:vi. Hereafter this work will be abbreviated as WJF.

5. Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 248.

understanding, and how a preacher's great work is to "aid his hearers" by expounding Scriptures "in a manner calculated to make men understand and value them."<sup>6</sup> That concern for personal understanding and appreciation can be seen in the full titles of numerous writings.<sup>7</sup>

Flavel's concern for understanding was not limited to the content of a message or treatise. His sermons and treatises display epistemological considerations that reflect a mind concerned with the means of understanding. How might the common people best understand? His writings display that Flavel worked within the tradition where knowledge, experience, and reason were valued as means toward understanding.<sup>8</sup> He follows the popular method described by Andreas Hyperius, using analogies, rhetoric, philosophy, emblems, and illustrations: "in sum, he omits nothing that in any way has the power to persuade and impress minds."<sup>9</sup> Flavel himself notes that people know by inferences—in one location he lists considerations that allow him to state things beyond all rational doubt: "the Scripture is plainly for it. And, there is nothing in reason against it."<sup>10</sup> In another place he spoke of doing "all that is capable of attracting an intellectual nature."<sup>11</sup> In yet another place he says, "we have three standing, ordinary, and sufficient

6. Murray, "Flavel," 6.

7. See John Flavel, "A Practical Treatise of Fear: Wherein the various kinds, uses, causes, effects, and remedies thereof are distinctly opened and prescribed, for the relief and encouragement of all those that fear God in these doubtful and distracting times," *WJF*, 3:239–320; John Flavel, "Planelogia: A succinct and seasonable Discourse of the Occasions, Causes, Nature, Rise, Growth, and Remedies of Mental Errors," *WJF*, 3:413–94; John Flavel, "Divine Conduct: Or, the Mystery of Providence, Opened in a Treatise Upon Psalm lvii.2," *WJF*, 4:336–497; John Flavel, "Husbandry Spiritualized: Or, the Heavenly Use of Earthly Things. Consisting of many pleasant observations, pertinent applications, and serious reflections...." *WJF*, 5:3–205.

8. See Daniël J. Maritz, "By Scripture and plain reason: A historical retrieval of the relationship between theology and philosophy to better engage with present-day secularism," *In die Skriflig* 57, no. 1 (2023):a2905 <https://doi.org/10.4102.ids.v57i1.2905>; Maarten Wisse, "Reformed Theology in Scholastic Development," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 59. Though Flavel is not primarily concerned here with evidences for God, or natural theology, see also Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625–1750: Gijsbertus Voetius, Petrus van Mastricht, and Anthonius Driessen* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 74–79.

9. Andreas Hyperius, *De recte formando*, 368–70; quoted in Donald Sinnema, "The Distinction between Scholastic and Popular: Andreas Hyperius and Reformed Scholasticism," in Carl R. Trueman and R. S. Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1999), 133.

10. John Flavel, "Pneumatologia: A Treatise of the Soul of Man," *WJF*, 3:39.

11. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:487.

means" to warn of death: "the Scriptures, reason, and daily examples."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Flavel was convinced that though those means may ask and answer unusual questions, they would be beneficial to non-scholastic minds that were searching for truth.<sup>13</sup>

This article describes the various means toward understanding which appear in Flavel's "Pneumatologia: A Treatise of the Soul of Man." According to the Dictionary of National Biography, this treatise seems to have been first published posthumously in 1698, though at least one remaining 1698 version notes that it was the second edition.<sup>14</sup> The treatise can be introductoryly understood by its original full title:

Pneumatologia: A Treatise of the Soul of Man: Wherein the Divine Original, Excellent and Immortal Nature of the Soul are opened; its Love and Inclination to the Body, with the necessity of its Separation from it, considered and improved. The Existence, Operations, and States of separated Souls, both in Heaven and Hell, immediately after Death, asserted, discussed, and variously applied. Divers knotty and difficult Questions about departed souls both Philosophical, and Theological, stated and determined. The Invaluable Preciousness of Human Souls, and the various Artifices of Satan (their professed Enemy) to destroy them, discovered. And the great Duty and Interest of all men, seasonably and heartily to comply with the most great and gracious Design of the Father, Son, and Spirit, for the Salvation of their Souls, argued and pressed.<sup>15</sup>

Within the "Pneumatologia," Flavel displayed a willingness to use a variety of means that "humbly and peaceably applied themselves to the impartial search of truth."<sup>16</sup> Flavel's value as a teacher concerned with epistemological considerations can be seen in his non-simplistic and intentional use of various means, including faith in revelation of Scripture, recognized wisdom in historical sources, and reasoning that comes from personal experience, all for the purpose of understanding and being prepared for eternity.

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12. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 3:66.

13. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:478; 2:480.

14. Thomas Hamilton, "John Flavel," in *Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by Leslie Stephen (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1889), 19:253–54.

15. John Flavel, *Pneumatologia: A Treatise of the Soul of Man* (London: Printed by J.D. for Tho. Parkhurst at the Bible and Three Crowns near Mercer's Chappel in Cheapside, 1698), i.

16. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:478.

### Faith in Scripture

Flavel turned to scriptural truths to explain the soul and its value. As Flavel defined the soul, it “is a vital, spiritual, and immortal substance, endowed with an understanding, will, and various affections; created with an inclination to the body, and infused therein by the Lord.”<sup>17</sup> However, and more specifically, Flavel promoted Scripture and his readers’ faith in Scripture, by building his treatise about the soul on the exposition of several main passages of Scripture, providing other scriptural support, and considering the soul in light of Scripture’s redemptive teaching.

The trust in Scripture was developed by expositions of passages that were obviously about the soul, and others that dealt with the soul by implication. The obvious passages included Genesis 2:7: “And the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul”; as well as Matthew 17:26: “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” The passages that were less obvious, and dealt with the personal soul by implication included Revelation 6:9–11: “I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the Word of God”; Ephesians 5:29: “For no man ever yet hated his own flesh, but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church”; 2 Peter 1:13–14: “As long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up, but putting you in remembrance: knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle”; Hebrews 12:23: “And to the spirits of just men made perfect”; 1 Peter 3:19: “By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison”; and Ephesians 5:16: “Redeeming the time because the days are evil.” The expositions of these passages were developed to answer more particular questions about the value of the soul, and applications or inferences drawn did not necessarily reflect the broader context of the original text.

The promotion of a trust in, and assent to, Scripture’s teaching was not limited to texts that headlined sections of the treatise. Throughout the various sections, Flavel was generous with supporting texts that buttressed his aims. As one example, under one inference about the daily providence of continued breath within people, Flavel noted six supporting texts: Deuteronomy 30:20; Daniel 5:23; Psalm 104:29; Psalm 66:9; Exodus 25:26; and Psalm 27:12.<sup>18</sup>

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17. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJF*, 2:495.

18. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJF*, 2:545.

Flavel's supporting texts came from both the Old and New Testament. They were often illustrations, or further detailing, of the broader point in the main exposition. Within the teaching from Genesis 2:7, Flavel also pointed to "that excellent place of Solomon, in Eccl. xii. 7. 'Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit to God who gave it'.... The two constitutive parts of man are a soul and a body: these two parts have two distinct originals: the body, as to its material cause, is dust; the soul, in its nature, is a spirit, and as to its origin, it proceed[s] from the Father of spirits; it is his own creature."<sup>19</sup>

Some of the uses of Scriptures were listed as possible objections to the content Flavel was teaching. In this Flavel displayed not only awareness of Scripture, but also of common thoughts and arguments. His response was to further explain the passage beyond the common understanding. For example, one objection he brought forward against his own teaching was based on various scriptures such as 2 Samuel 14:14: "We must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again," as well as Psalm 88:10–12 and Isaiah 38 that seem to confirm the cessation of the soul's activity upon death: "the dead cannot praise thee." Flavel's explanation is that these words are "not to be understood absolutely, but respectively: and the meaning is, that the soul is in the body as some precious liquor in a brittle glass, which being broken by death, the soul is irrecoverably gone.... All the means in the world cannot fetch it back into the body again."<sup>20</sup> The soul will never return to the same body and same activity that it had on earth: this "denies not life to departed souls, but affirms the end of this animal life at death: the life we live in the other world is of a different nature."<sup>21</sup>

Flavel similarly took supporting passages and expanded them to make them personal. In one section, he wrote, "Holy Paul appeals to God in this matter; Rom. i. 9. 'God is my witness (saith he) whom I serve with my spirit; q.d. I serve God in my spirit, and he knows that I do so. I dare appeal to him who searches my heart, that it is not idle and unconcerned in his service."<sup>22</sup> In another section Flavel wrote, "We believe this very same numerical body shall rise again, Job xxi. 27 by the return of the same soul into it, which now dwelleth in it; and that we shall be the same persons that now we are: the remunerative justice of God requiring it to be so."<sup>23</sup>

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19. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:516–17.

20. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:579.

21. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:579.

22. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:535.

23. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:576.

One of Flavel's favorite supporting passages seemed to be Matthew 10:28: "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." He referenced the passage at least six times. He considered the security of souls in Christ the greatest argument against fear, in part because it was stated by the Savior Himself.<sup>24</sup> Even if God permits the destruction of a body, that soul is secure, sometimes by the ministry of angels, and by God's own hand and power.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, the soul needs the redemption that Scripture revealed. Flavel saw the Scriptures affirming the sin of Adam being passed down to future souls.<sup>26</sup> He pointed to Scriptures to propose the doctrine that "the souls or spirits of all men who die in a state of unbelief and disobedience, are immediately committed to the prison of hell, there to suffer the wrath of God due to their sins."<sup>27</sup> And yet Flavel also affirmed the biblical teaching of the Holy Spirit restoring the beauty of souls, noting that "it restores it with this advantage, that it shall never be lost again; holiness is the beauty of God impressed upon the soul, and the impression is everlasting."<sup>28</sup>

In all his Scripture quoting, Flavel did not lose sight of the redemptive message of Scripture. He recognized the knowledge of Christ to be the most excellent and necessary teaching; but the worth of Christ would remain unknown, until the personal value and dangers of souls would be realized.<sup>29</sup> He used Bible texts not just to define and illustrate, but to point to Christ. He noted that "if our souls perish with our bodies, Christ would be greatly disappointed: Nor can that promise be ever made good to him; Isa. liii. 11. 'He shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied.' He hath done his work, but where is his reward? See how this supposition strikes at the justice of God, and wounds his faithfulness in his covenant with his Son."<sup>30</sup>

While Flavel did sprinkle Scripture texts throughout his treatise, and structure the treatise around various passages, it was not merely for text-proofing reasons. He sincerely saw the truths of Scripture revealing invisible truths that are necessary for the proper valuing of the soul. And yet that is not the only means he used to persuade people of the value of their souls.

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24. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 3:281.

25. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:585.

26. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:521.

27. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 3:130.

28. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:539–40.

29. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:476.

30. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:572.

## Wisdom from Historic Sources

While Flavel was a preacher of God's Word and sought to instill a high level of knowledge of Scripture in his hearers, he did not avoid other sources. In line with Augustinian tradition, he recognized wisdom from a broad range of historic sources.<sup>31</sup> This was not for the appearance of worldly wisdom but reveals searching for truth in all ways that would press home the importance of the soul.

Flavel's use of other sources from history may be surprising, considering that early in the treatise he wrote that the account of Moses in Genesis "is full of sense, reason, congruity, and clearness; and such as renders all the essays of all the Heathen philosophers to be vain, inevident, self-repugnant, and inexplicable theories."<sup>32</sup> Further, in the preface to the treatise, he wrote that "the helps philosophy affords in some parts of this discourse are too great to be despised, and too small to be admired. I confess I read the definitions of the soul given by the ancient philosophers with a compassionate smile.... One word of God gives me more light than a thousand such laborious trifles."<sup>33</sup> And yet, "Pneumatologia" reveals Flavel readily used other sources, including poets, philosophers, historians, and theologians.

Flavel used poetry as a means to understanding. Early in the Epistle Dedicatory to "Pneumatologia," Flavel quoted the Roman poet Juvenal, "know thyself, as an oracle descending from heaven."<sup>34</sup> This was not a one-time display of broader knowledge, or artistic appeal, but part of Flavel's desire for every means in the humble search for the truth. Later, Flavel used the Greek poet Homer as an illustration, calling him an "incomparable poet" of worth and excellency.<sup>35</sup> But it was not just historic poets who were quoted. Flavel referenced John Davies, an English poet and politician, who was "the learned author of that small, but excellent" poem, which was "true and ingenious."<sup>36</sup>

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31. See Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.40, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1997).

32. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:489.

33. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:485.

34. Juvenal, *Satires*, XI, line 39. The edition used for reference here was Charles Badham, ed., *The Satires of Juvenal* (London: A. J. Walpy, 1814).

35. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 3:162.

36. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:505. Flavel quotes five stanzas of John Davies's poem *Nosce Teipsum*. In English anthologies, it has been titled "The Intellectual Powers of the Soul."

More common than poets were the philosophers. Flavel referenced numerous philosophers for illustration. He pointed out various philosophers' definitions of the soul: "Thales calls it a nature without repose; Asclepiades, an exercitation of sense! Hesiod, a thing composed of earth and water: Parmenides, a thing composed of earth and fire: Galen saith it is heat."<sup>37</sup> He used the Roman philosopher Pliny's account of mermaids as an illustration of a Proverbs 9:17 warning that "that which tickles the fancy stabs the soul."<sup>38</sup>

Flavel was not against using philosophy or philosophers for affirmation. He followed their distinctions of the understanding, noting that philosophers "rightly called it" the leading faculty.<sup>39</sup> However, he was not afraid to acknowledge that "both scripture and philosophy consent in this, that the soul is the chief, most noble, and principal part of man."<sup>40</sup> The ancient Greek physician Hippocrates was quoted regarding a definition of soul,<sup>41</sup> and then later is used to "decide this matter" of the soul's incorruptibility.<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, is cited regarding a definition of soul,<sup>43</sup> the habits of sin,<sup>44</sup> and the terribleness of death.<sup>45</sup> Flavel also used the Roman historian Suetonius's account of Caesar's impending death as evidence of premonitions of death.<sup>46</sup>

Within "Pneumatologia" Flavel seemed to have considerable awareness, and affinity, with Seneca, the Roman Stoic philosopher.<sup>47</sup> That does not mean Flavel was blind to the renowned moralist's weaknesses.<sup>48</sup> However, Flavel went as far as to say, "there is a *real truth* in that strange expression of Seneca."<sup>49</sup> In another place, "It was a *great saying* of an Heathen, I am greater, and born to greater things, 'than that I should be a slave to my body.'"<sup>50</sup>

37. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:485.

38. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 3:196.

39. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:503.

40. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:496.

41. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:485.

42. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:561.

43. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:485.

44. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 3:193.

45. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 3:140.

46. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 3:68.

47. This is not just true within "Pneumatologia." There are 40 references to Seneca in Flavel's work, and only 10 are within the treatise under consideration.

48. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:448.

49. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:603; emphasis added.

50. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:536; emphasis added.

In yet another Seneca was noted as "the wise Heathen."<sup>51</sup> The greatness of sinful habits was also recognized by Seneca, and appreciated by Flavel.<sup>52</sup>

More particularly, Flavel suggested the power of truths as expressed by Seneca should convict Christians: "It is admirable, and very convictive of most Christians, what we read in a Heathen. I confess (saith Seneca) there is a love to the body implanted in us all; we have the tutelage and charge of it; we may be kind and indulgent to it, but must not serve it; but he that serves it, is a servant to many cares, fears, and passions."<sup>53</sup> In another passage he quoted Seneca describing the foolishness of those who live unbridled lives, concluding, "O what a shame is it to hear Heathenism out-brave Christianity!"<sup>54</sup>

But it was not just Greek and Roman sources Flavel appreciated. He also looked to a long line of various Christian theologians, reaching back to the early church. The early bishop of Carthage, Cyprian, was noted,<sup>55</sup> as were Tertullian<sup>56</sup> and Athanasius.<sup>57</sup> Chrysostom, an influential archbishop in Constantinople, was recognized for able observations,<sup>58</sup> and valuable quotes.<sup>59</sup> Flavel also referred to, and quoted from, Salvian, an early Christian writer and teacher of rhetoric from Gaul.<sup>60</sup>

Augustine was another favorite of Flavel.<sup>61</sup> One expression of Augustine was described as rational, scriptural, and justifiable.<sup>62</sup> Flavel used Augustine for illustrations,<sup>63</sup> to support his own conclusions,<sup>64</sup> as well as

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51. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 3:194.

52. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 3:193.

53. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 2:583–84.

54. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 3:196.

55. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 3:69; 3:211. Cyprian is noted 9 times in the entire *WJF*.

56. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 2:495. Tertullian is noted 32 times in the entire *WJF*.

57. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 2:488. Athanasius is noted 15 times in the entire *WJF*.

58. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 2:570, 3:180.

59. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 3:195. Chrysostom is noted 28 times in the entire *WJF*.

60. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 3:150, 3:174; 3:211. Salvian is noted 11 times in the entire *WJF*.

61. Though there are fewer references to Augustine than to Seneca within the entire *WJF*, as well as within this treatise.

62. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 2:493.

63. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 2:595; 3:27; 3:78; 3:188.

64. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF* 3:24; 3:81.

for presenting conjecture regarding why departed souls attain knowledge with more ease than when they had bodies.<sup>65</sup>

Flavel also pointed to Catholic theologians. The contemplative Bernard is referred to six times in the treatise.<sup>66</sup> Flavel also drew on Thomas Aquinas twice in this treatise, once affirming what Aquinas said as truth, and another time using Aquinas for illustration.<sup>67</sup>

Flavel also used a broader range of Protestant sources. Wolfgang Musculus, a German Reformed theologian, is referenced positively as having excellent words.<sup>68</sup> John Knox, the Scottish reformer, is used for a confirming illustration.<sup>69</sup> Jerome Zanchius, an Italian Protestant educator, was appreciated as learned—even as he cited Cicero.<sup>70</sup> William Fenner, a fellow English Puritan, was also referenced in “Pneumatologia.”<sup>71</sup> John Sterne, an Irish physician and ecclesiastical writer, was used as support for some of Flavel’s concerns.<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, while he referenced Calvin forty-four times throughout the rest of his works, Calvin received no explicit reference in this work. Similarly, William Ames received one footnote in the treatise, while referenced thirty times throughout the rest of Flavel’s works.

In all of this, Flavel seemed to follow the thought of Joseph Justus Scaliger, a French Calvinist who appreciated and expanded classical history, referencing Scaliger at least three times in “Pneumatologia.”<sup>73</sup> They both saw philosophers can agree with Scripture.<sup>74</sup>

The value of retrieving more use of other sources does not lie in mere imitation or quotation. Flavel was still discerning about his sources. He realized some truths were stifled and suppressed by atheists, while others were accepted and abused by the sensualists.<sup>75</sup> His references to Aristotle were not all positive: “How have the schools of Epicurus, and Aristotle, the Cartesians, and other sects of philosophers abused and troubled the world with a kind of philosophical enthusiasm, and a great many ridiculous

65. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 3:46; 3:130.

66. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 2:475; 2:505; 3:51 (twice); 3:173; 3:211.

67. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 2:493; 2:572. Aquinas is referenced at least 5 other times in the *WJE*.

68. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 2:539.

69. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 3:67.

70. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 2:564.

71. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 2:510.

72. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 3:69; 3:73; 3:75.

73. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 2:478; 3:44; 3:161.

74. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 2:497.

75. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJE* 2:482.

fancies about the original of the soul of man!"<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Flavel pointed out errors from Philo, Plutarch,<sup>77</sup> as well as Plato and Origen.<sup>78</sup> He recognized that he avoided more modern philosophers since they clouded the issue with controversies, and obscure scholastic terms.<sup>79</sup> He quoted Thomas Manton's evaluation of Pelagius.<sup>80</sup>

In this, it should be clear that the means Flavel used for promoting understanding went beyond Scripture to wisdom from other sources.

### **Reasoning from Experience**

Flavel also promoted personal reasoning and reflection on experience as a means towards understanding. While truth about souls may seem invisible and eternal and therefore distant from the human mind, Flavel found it possible to be heavenly minded through the natural abilities of the mind, as well as the gracious principles of the renewed mind.<sup>81</sup> The soul has abilities and powers, sensitive of all natural and spiritual light, which pursues truth: "it pursues eagerly after it, and even spends itself and the body too in the chase and prosecution of truth; when it lies deep, as a subterranean treasure, the mind sends out innumerable thoughts, reinforcing each other in thick successions, to dig for, and compass that invaluable treasure."<sup>82</sup> While Flavel expected a degree of universal reasoning, he appealed for his readers to think carefully, using his own thought process as a personal example.

Flavel did expect a universal experience of reflection from his audiences. Experience and reason were to be every man's careful consideration.<sup>83</sup> The relationship between body and soul "is plain and sensible to any man."<sup>84</sup> The fact that all people seem to be able to reflect on the soul displayed a

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76. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:488.

77. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:501.

78. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:514.

79. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:486.

80. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:506–507.

81. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 3:102.

82. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 3:156. In this Flavel seems to parallel or reflect ideas of Peter Martyr Vermigli, who described philosophy as "a capacity given by God to human minds, developed through effort and exercise, by which all existing things are perceived as surely and logically as possible, to enable us to attain happiness" in "Philosophy and Theology," in *Philosophical Works: On the Relation of Philosophy to Theology*, Volume 4 of The Peter Martyr Library, trans. and ed. Joseph C. McLelland (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publications, 1996), 7.

83. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:571.

84. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:592.

universality that was important: "For if it were not a truth agreeable to the light of nature, and so easily received by all men upon the proposal of it, it were impossible that all the nations in the world should embrace it so readily, and hold it so tenaciously as they do."<sup>85</sup> In other words, it is not just the spread of a tradition: the soul itself amounts to evidence of the reality and existence of invisible things:

For as the natural senses and their organs prove that there are colours, sounds, savours, and juices; as well as, or rather because there are eyes, ears, &c. naturally fitted to close with; and receive them; so it is here, if the soul naturally looks beyond the line of time, to things eternal, and cannot bound and confine its thoughts and expectations within the too narrow limits of present things, surely there is a such a future state, as well as souls made apprehensive of it, and propense to close with the discoveries thereof.<sup>86</sup>

Other common experiences and desires, such as justice, also pointed to the immortality of the soul.<sup>87</sup>

And yet not everyone who thinks, properly understands the value of the soul, or the search for truth. Personal reflection on the soul does not guarantee appropriate conclusions. Flavel recognized there were those who did not receive the full blessing of the gift: "For its self-reflecting and considering power, it seems in many to be a power received in vain. It is with most souls as it is with the eye, which sees not itself, though it sees all other objects."<sup>88</sup> There are many who have groundlessly imagined no ideas, or only wrong ideas, about souls.<sup>89</sup> There are others whose reflections are limited by their own bodies: "The experience of the whole world shews us how the apprehensions, judgments, wit, and memory of old men fail, even to that degree that they become children again in respect of the abilities of their minds."<sup>90</sup> The age of debauchery, and those who chase such expressions, reveals some people "have lost the sense of sin, the restraints of shame and fear, and then what is left to check them in their course?"<sup>91</sup> In other words, general humanity is not able to provide all moral solutions.<sup>92</sup>

85. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:565.

86. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:537–38.

87. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:577.

88. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:482.

89. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 3:15; 2:557.

90. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:561.

91. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 3:208.

92. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 3:218.

While Flavel even allowed for significant purposes in dreams,<sup>93</sup> he did not permit personal experience as subjective license. Personal experience was a gift from God. The conscience's ability to reflect, as well as its passions and affections, are placed by divine Wisdom.<sup>94</sup> Among all the gifts of the Creator upon the soul, "the ability of reflection and self-intuition, are peculiar, invaluable, and heavenly gifts."<sup>95</sup> Elsewhere, Flavel pointed out apprehensions and desires as clues.<sup>96</sup> Even fear should uncover truths.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, human understanding allows a person to apprehend and judge all intelligible things, distinguishing truth from error and falsehood, and guiding into proper musing, or inward speaking, of the mind.<sup>98</sup> The gift of experience should seal on hearts a confidence of communion with God.<sup>99</sup> And it was not that all those experiences had to be positive: "You may plainly see the wisdom of God in all the afflictions and burdens he lays upon his people in this world, and find that all is but enough to wean their souls from their bodies, and make them willing to part with them."<sup>100</sup> And so what Flavel said about the proximity of regenerate souls to eternity, could apply to the experiences of all regenerate souls: "Ponder this with pleasure."<sup>101</sup>

Flavel admitted there was a mysterious element to experience, particularly of the soul. "It is a most astonishing mystery to see heaven and earth married together in one person."<sup>102</sup> And yet mystery was not the answer to everything either: "We must remain ignorant of some things about our souls, till we come into the condition of just men made perfect. Mean time, I think it much more our concernment to study how we may get sin out of our souls, than to puzzle our brains to find out how it came into them."<sup>103</sup>

Consequently, Flavel desired others to use their own reasoning from experience properly. Those experiences could be hypothetical and logical. In dealing with the possible independence of the soul from the body, Flavel points to Scriptures, but then asks a hypothetical reflection:

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93. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 3:70.

94. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 3:158.

95. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:482.

96. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:569.

97. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:591.

98. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:503.

99. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 3:48.

100. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:599.

101. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:547.

102. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:493.

103. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE* 2:520.

Though in its ordinary actions in this life, it doth use the body as its tool or instrument in working, doth it thence follow that it can neither subsist or act separate from them in the other world? Whilst a man is on horseback in his journey, he useth the help and service of his horse, and is moved according to the motion of his horse; but doth it thence follow, he cannot stand nor walk alone, when dismounted at his journey's end? We know angels both live and act, without the ministry of bodies, and our souls are spiritual substances as well as they.<sup>104</sup>

Their experience could be personal. People were to look within themselves and consider their own minds and wills: they were to look to their hearts, think, sit down and count the cost, still live, choosing to be sincere and plain-hearted.<sup>105</sup> In the Epistle Dedicatory to "Pneumatologia," he appealed: "If you will but allow yourselves to think close to the matter before you, I doubt not but you may find somewhat in it apt both to inform your minds and quicken your affections.... [I hope you] can and do find time to sit alone, and bethink yourselves of a much more important business."<sup>106</sup> If people would reflect on souls properly, they would learn things about themselves.<sup>107</sup> In pastorally aiming at this, Flavel addressed souls in a personal way:

What say you, Souls? Will you at last open the door to Jesus Christ, or will you still exclude him? If you will open to him, he will not come empty-handed.... But, if you will not open to him, than I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you have once barred the doors of your soul against him, whose pleasure and power gave them their very beings; against him who is their sovereign Lord, and rightful Owner. And consequently this act of yours must stop your mouths, and deprive you of all pleas and apologies.<sup>108</sup>

These humble reflections on experience needed to be proper. They were to bring about a degree of honesty and realism regarding life: "Many ships are gone down to the bottom, for all the brave names of the *Success*, the *Prosperous*, the *Happy Return*, and so will you. There is a knowing of ourselves

104. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:578.

105. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:598–99. See also Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 3:15; 3:18.

106. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:478.

107. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 3:34.

108. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:541.

by taste and real experience, Heb. x. 34, which doth a soul more service in a suffering hour, than all the splendid names and titles in the world."<sup>109</sup>

And yet, even while appealing for personal reflection, Flavel remained discriminating regarding the thoughts of the unregenerate. It is not that Flavel thought the unrighteous were thoughtless: they had just not thought through to the end of their actions: "Ponder it, thou poor Christless and unsanctified soul. Get thee out of the noise and clamour of this world, which make such a continual din in thine ears, and consider how thou hangest over the mouth of hell itself, by the feeble thread which is spun every moment out of thy nostrils; as soon as that gives way, thou art gone for ever. What shift do you make to quiet your fears, and eat, and drink, and labour with any pleasure?"<sup>110</sup>

To help others to think and reflect, Flavel provided examples of his own thought process. His personal experience could also be a means toward helping others understand truth. Regarding the origin of the soul, he wrote, "to me it is clear, that the soul receives not its beginning by traduction or generation.... Nor is it imaginable how a soul should be produced out of matter.... As it is most reasonable, so it is most scriptural."<sup>111</sup> Regarding the function of the soul, he realized, "I can neither see, hear, nor feel it, but I both see, hear, and feel by it.... I find my soul to be a vital, as well as a spiritual substance."<sup>112</sup> Regarding the value and glory of the soul, he noted his own contemplations: "my dim eyes see but little of its excellency... I cannot conceive of it, but by it... I find my soul to be the most substantial and noble part of me; it is not my body, but my soul which makes me a man. And if this depart, all the rest of me is but a dead log, a lump of inanimate clay."<sup>113</sup> Flavel himself felt the guilt of forgetting the value of the soul: "I studied to know many other things, but I knew not myself."<sup>114</sup>

One reason Flavel saw so much potential in human experience, is because he saw people as "prospecting" creatures. What they worked at, and

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109. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:599.

110. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:548. This illustration of hanging over hell by a thread may be what inspired Jonathan Edwards in his later, more famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." This illustration appears numerous times in Flavel, whom Edwards read.

111. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:515.

112. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:523.

113. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:522. See also Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 3:23.

114. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJE*, 2:483.

loved, would bring them pleasure.<sup>115</sup> That did not mean they should expect any spiritual blessing apart from the Holy Spirit.<sup>116</sup> The truth is not all such prospecting was in the right direction. Many people only delve into the present: “We keep ourselves in such a continual hurry and crowd of cares, thoughts, and employments about the concerns of the body, that we can find little time to be alone, communing with our own hearts about our great concernments in eternity.”<sup>117</sup> But in an Augustinian sense, people’s restlessness and uncenteredness was to propel spiritual reflection: “I find that I am in a continual motion towards my everlasting abode, and the experience of my time; and many infirmities tell me that I am not far from it: by all which I am strongly prompted to look forward, and acquaint myself as much as I can, with my next place and employment. I look with a greedy and inquisitive eye that way. Yet would I not be guilty of an unwarrantable curiosity in searching into revealed things.”<sup>118</sup>

And with such a conviction of prospecting humanity, Flavel addressed all who might hear or read: “Let me persuade every soul of you to express your love to the body, by labouring to get union with Jesus Christ, and thereby to prevent the utter ruin of both to all eternity. Souls, if you love yourselves, or the bodies you dwell in, shew it by your preventing care in season, lest they be cast away forever.”<sup>119</sup> Their understanding of souls should be influenced by their own reflection on their own soul.

## Conclusion

Flavel’s content has much to teach us, but so does his method. His variety of sources in the pursuit of knowledge is not singular and reflects a breadth that is not entirely novel within the Puritans.<sup>120</sup> Regardless, he did not denigrate Scripture, or the authority of revelation, as Scripture itself includes common knowledge, reasoning, and belief. Indeed, even in “Pneumatologia,” Flavel was not working against the Reformational principle of *sola Scriptura*. Rather, he was consistent with a broader tradition that did

115. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJF*, 3:43.

116. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJF*, 2:478.

117. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJF*, 3:16.

118. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJF*, 2:485.

119. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJF*, 2:608.

120. Richard Muller recently discussed something similar in a colloquium regarding John Owen. His speech can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7xedAm7FnU>.

not eliminate all other sources but considered Scripture the final authority over other sources.<sup>121</sup>

Recognizing Flavel's method has implications for Christian ministry today. In general, the Puritans should not be guarded as a legacy because they used Scripture instead of other sources; they used Scripture as the authority for all the content and methods of their understanding. The value of the Puritan legacy also lies in their epistemology; their teachings cannot be understood apart from their foundational commitments to Scripture and epistemology. Within this, it must be recognized that Flavel used a variety of sources to appeal at a popular level. His own learning was to serve the people.

This has further implications for those preparing, and listening to, sermons. The authoritative statements in a sermon are not developed from any variety of sources. The Scriptures are explicated. But if following the Puritan example of John Flavel, for matters of clarification and support, in order to promote and defend the truth, a variety of sources may be used.

The goal in such a search for strongly supported truth, is and remains proper Christian affections prior to death. As Flavel himself said, "If you will but allow yourselves to think close to the matter before you, I doubt not but you may find somewhat in it apt both to inform your minds *and quicken your affections*."<sup>122</sup> And all means were valid when proper Christian response would result: "Could I think of any other means or motives to secure your souls from danger, I would surely use them: could I reach your hearts effectually, I would deeply impress this great concern upon them: But I can neither do God's part of the work, nor yours; it is some ease to me, I have in sincerity, (though with much imperfection and feebleness) done part of my own. The Lord prosper it by the blessing of his Spirit in the hearts of them that read it."<sup>123</sup>

The goal of such Christian affections is most helpful because of its eternal significance. Then whether making social commentary or providing counsel, teaching a class or writing a conference speech, allowing various

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121. Consider Daniël J. Maritz, "By Scripture and plain reason: A historical retrieval of the relationship between theology and philosophy to better engage with present-day secularism," in *In die Skriflig* 57, no. 1 (2023):a2908. Retrieved <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v57i1.2908>; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 111. See also the related concept in Belgic Confession Article 2.

122. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 2:478.

123. Flavel, "Pneumatologia," *WJF*, 3:238.

means to increase understanding may be helpful in preparing people for eternal realities. Or, as Flavel put it, “the wisdom of a Christian is eminently discovered in saving and improving *all* opportunities in this world, for that world which is to come.”<sup>124</sup>

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124. Flavel, “Pneumatologia,” *WJF*, 3:226. Emphasis added.