Cleveland’s detailed study of a substantial medieval source of Owen’s theology constitutes a welcome contribution to the research of Puritanism in general and of Owen in particular.

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John Flavel shares the enviable characteristic with Thomas Watson of being one of the most readable Puritan writers for contemporary readers. Brian Cosby, pastor of Wayside Presbyterian Church on Signal Mountain, Tennessee, has likewise produced a very readable introduction to the life and theology of John Flavel.

This book is arranged into two parts. The first section consists of three chapters that examine Flavel’s life. Cosby places Flavel within his Puritan context (ch. 1), offers a summary of his life and ministry (ch. 2), and concludes this introductory section with a consideration of Flavel’s legacy (ch. 3). Flavel was well known among the early evangelicals of the eighteenth century and read by Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, John Newton, and William Wilberforce, to name but a few who were influenced by his practical divinity. Unfortunately, there are not any references made to those who shaped Flavel’s own theology except John Calvin.

The second portion of the book, which is essentially twice the size of the opening section, examines Flavel’s theology. Six chapters are devoted to Flavel’s Theological Heritage (ch. 4), The Doctrine and Use of Scripture (ch. 5), Theology Proper (including the Doctrine of God and Christology), Creation and the Fall (ch. 6), Covenant Theology, Election, and Soteriology (ch. 7), The Law of God and the Christian Life (ch. 8) and Church, Sacrament, and Eschatology (ch. 9).

Cosby’s primary thesis is that Flavel’s theology is consistent with both John Calvin and the Westminster Assembly (pp. 50–52, 131, 137n101). Given his desire to confirm this, he correctly refutes the position of those who see a discontinuity between Calvin and the reformed theology of the sixteenth century and that of the Puritans of the next century. While there are shades of uniqueness both between Calvin and the seventeenth century, and among the Puritans, many were consciously and consistently in harmony with the Genevan Reformer.

There are a number of significant strengths to this small book. It is highly engaging and the author often articulates important and even thorny theological
discussions in a manner that is inviting for general readers. For example, in exploring the critical seventeenth-century debate regarding Nomism and Antinomianism, he succinctly summarizes the major issues and challenges to this debate (p. 110). Another strength is Cosby’s extensive endnotes that provide either helpful summaries or a broad overview to the major writers addressing the various points related to Flavel’s theology. An example of this is his brief but helpful synopsis of the third use of the law (p. 117n24). In virtually all of these references, he provides the best sources for further study on the respective topics. This extends the usefulness of this volume beyond the general reader for those who are engaging in more in depth research.

While there is much that shines in this book there are also some items that challenge the accuracy or depth of this study. The most troubling is Cosby’s repeated claims that John Flavel’s “The Fountain of Life Opened Up: or, A Display of Christ in His Essential and Mediatorial Glory (1673) is arguably the most extensive study of the person and work of Christ published in English Puritanism during the seventeenth century” (p. 76, cf. p. 23). He compares Flavel’s work with other Puritan titles including works by Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, and James Durham (p. 86n23).

Surprisingly, he is silent on Isaac Ambrose (1604-1664) who wrote his classic treatment on Christology, Looking Unto Jesus, in 1658. Flavel himself is clear about his own indebtedness to Ambrose when he declares “Divers worthy modern pens have indeed undertaken this noble subject (i.e. on the nature and person of Christ, TS) before me, some more succinctly, and others more copiously (here he specifically adds Isaac Ambrose’s name in the margin, TS): these have done worthily, and their praises are in the churches of Christ.”3 Ambrose’s Looking unto Jesus is significantly longer and probes this topic at a greater depth than Flavel. The author also seemed unaware of the major sources related to the larger debate that has consumed Puritan studies over the past few decades in the elusive efforts to define actually what is a Puritan (11n5).

Once this important correction regarding Flavel’s undisputed claim to have produced the most comprehensible treatment of Christology has been noted, this book can still serve as a helpful introduction for general readers to introduce them to one of the great writers of seventeenth-century Puritan experimental and practical piety.

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