

CHAPTER 2.

CHRIST, CHRISTIANS, AND THE THREEFOLD OFFICE

Everyone has a personal name. Your parents may have chosen your name because they really liked the meaning of that particular name. Perhaps they named you after one of your grandparents. Parents may have many different reasons for choosing a name for their child.

As they grow up, though, some people are given a title in addition to their personal names. For example, someone may be called Pastor Eric Jones. His personal name is “Eric.” His family name is “Jones.” And his title, referring to his ecclesiastical office, is “Pastor.” Similarly, there are other titles associated with other offices. Some examples are emperor, king, president, prime minister, and judge.

A title is different from a name, even though both may belong to the same person. Therefore, we should always be careful to distinguish between an office (with its associated title) and a person (with his name). For example, Judge John Smith may be your neighbour. As neighbours, you speak together occasionally. Perhaps you have even had a meal or two together. However, for the sake of argument let us say that you are not so impressed with this judge. In your opinion, he is far too selfish and harsh. Nevertheless, when Judge Smith makes a decision, as a citizen you still have to respect that decision because of the office that the man holds. So, when it comes to the justice system, and many other areas

of life, we need to distinguish between office (title) and person (name). The same applies in doctrine, only in a much more profound way.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has both names and titles. Some of his names are “Jesus” and “Immanuel.” His titles include “Lord” and “Christ.” Thankfully, whether we study our Mediator through his names or through his titles, we always come to the same conclusion: he is a glorious Deliverer for whom we must be eternally grateful. At the same time, distinguishing between his names and his titles gives us a clearer understanding of his threefold office. His office is a key part of our salvation and, as we will soon see, it has a significant impact on how we think about ourselves as Christians.

MANY TITLES FOR OUR MEDIATOR

On the pages of Scripture our Saviour receives numerous, different titles. Many of them are descriptive of who he is and what he will do. Here is a partial list: Son of God (Ps 2:7), Wonderful Counselor (Isa 9:6), Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6), Son of Man (Dan 7:13–14), the Branch (Zech 3:8), Lamb of God (John 1:29), Word of Life (1 John 1:1), Lion of Judah (Rev 5:5), Root of David (Rev 5:5), and the Alpha and Omega (Rev 22:13).

Closely connected to these titles is another, very common one: Lord. The Greek word for Lord is *kurios*. The phrase “Lord Jesus” occurs more than 100 times in the NT. Moreover, many more times the context of a verse indicates that “Lord,” used by itself, actually refers to Jesus. Now in some cases, the person who calls Jesus “Lord” may only intend to address him in a respectful way. For example, the Samaritan woman, by the well of Sychar, certainly does this when she says, “Sir (Greek: *kurios*), you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep” (John 4:11). However, other times it is undeniable that calling Jesus “Lord” involves acknowledging that he is *the* Lord, that is, God himself. One vivid example of this is at the baptism of Jesus, where John the Baptist is described as the one who fulfills Isaiah 40:3–5 by preparing “the way of the Lord” (Luke 3:4). It is clear from the context that this Lord (Greek: *kurios*) for whom John prepares the way is Jesus. Yet in the original

prophecy, the Hebrew word for Lord is actually *Yahweh*, the personal name of God. Thus, there can be no doubt that with the title “Lord,” Jesus is honored as no one less than God himself.

ONE SPECIAL TITLE: CHRIST

One more title of our Mediator deserves extra attention, and that is *Christ*. Christ is also very common in the NT, occurring well over 500 times. Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *Messiah*. Both of them mean the same thing: the Anointed One. Anointing with oil was a solemn ceremony, which marked the beginning of someone’s service in a particular, public office. Aaron was anointed with oil when he began to serve as high priest in the LORD’S tabernacle (Lev 8:12). Similarly, Samuel anointed David with oil and declared him the next king of Israel (1 Sam 16:1, 13). Finally, the LORD instructed Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor in the office of prophet (1 Kgs 19:16). In the NT this anointing is not done symbolically, with oil, but in reality, with the Spirit of God (Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38).

Furthermore, since believers are grafted into Christ, like branches into a vine (John 15:5), not only he, but also we have been anointed. Addressing the entire congregation, the apostle John writes, “But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge” (1 John 2:20, 27). This is a truth with profound implications. As the Heidelberg Catechism explains, just as Christ is a prophet, priest, and king, so we, who share in his anointing, are Christian prophets, priests, and kings (LD 12).

In a moment we will look at each aspect of this threefold office in turn, but for now we should pause to contemplate the significance of holding office as such. Many Christians do not consider themselves qualified to hold any sort of office. They are content to be called disciples of Jesus Christ, but they do not think of themselves as being a Christian prophet, or priest, let alone a king! For them, confessing faith is one thing, but serving in office is another—much higher and possibly unattainable—thing. Such thinking is understandable but misguided. Jesus was anointed at his baptism when the Holy Spirit descended upon him

(Matt 3:13–17; Luke 3:22). This Christ is the head, and his church is the body (Eph 5:23). Through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, Christ and his church are united as one (Eph 5:31–32; note especially v. 32). Thus, what happens to the one affects the other. Since the head is anointed, his body is also anointed (Ps 133:2). This includes all members of the church, not just a select few (1 Cor 12:12–13). After all, the apostle Peter does refer to all of us as prophets (Acts 2:17–18) and “a royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9).

Then again, other Christians feel that unless they are ordained into a special ecclesiastical office, such as being a minister, elder, or deacon, they are second-class citizens in the church. This kind of thinking is also misguided. These members ought to re-focus on the immense privilege of sharing in the anointing of no one less than God’s own Son. Moreover, to be a prophet, priest, and king—simultaneously none the less—is more than enough privilege and responsibility to keep anyone occupied for a lifetime. After all, as we just saw, the apostle Peter calls the entire congregation a “*royal* priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9), and royalty definitely belongs to the first class, not the second.

Furthermore, office is an honour that is given to someone, not something that should be grasped, let alone grabbed, by anyone. This already applies to Christ. “And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest” (Heb 5:4–5). Since this applies to Christ, it certainly applies to Christians, too. The threefold office is not an earned commodity; instead, it is a bestowed responsibility. For this reason we ought to fulfil this office with due humility and careful diligence.

Added to that, we must use the threefold office to accomplish God’s agenda, not our own personal desires. For example, Saul was anointed as king over Israel (1 Sam 10:1), but when he ignored God’s commands and charged ahead on his own path, the LORD rejected him (1 Sam 15:22–23) and replaced him with someone else, namely, David (1 Sam 16:1). So, an office can be given, but it can also be taken away. This truth should spur all Christians to remain faithful in their divinely ordained anointing.

Thankfully, our Mediator Jesus Christ is not only faithful in his office, but as the Perfect and Holy One, he holds his office forever (Heb 7:24). Now let us focus more specifically on this threefold office of Christ, which is also shared by Christians.

CHRIST AND CHRISTIAN AS PROPHET

In the Old Testament the official task of a prophet was straightforward. He had to convey God's Word, in the first place, to God's own people (Isa 1–11), but also to those who did not serve the LORD (Isa 13–23). In short, he was a divinely ordained messenger. At the same time, he was much more than just a mailman. He also had to ensure that, as much as possible, the people also clearly understood the message he delivered. In order to accomplish the latter, at times the LORD required extreme measures from his prophets. The LORD instructed the prophet Ezekiel to lie on his left side for 390 days and then on his right side for another 40 days (Ezek 4:4–6). The prophet Hosea had to marry an adulterous woman (Hos 1:2). These abnormal actions, which accompanied the prophetic words they spoke, drove home the message. God's people still could, and often did, reject the message, but no one could rightly say that the message was vague!

The prophet's calling to proclaim God's message to God's people should be understood in the context of creation and the fall into sin. The LORD God created human beings with cognitive, emotional, and relational capabilities so that they could know him. The Catechism says it well in Q&A 6: "God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, *so that he might rightly know God his Creator.*" In Scripture, knowing not only involves organizing and storing information, but it also includes building a bond of love and loyalty. To take a simple example, it is one thing to say, "I know all the dates for my history test"; it is another to say, "Over the years I have really come to know my husband." God created us to know him—not merely as a fact, but much more as a Father. Yet when Adam and Eve gave into temptation and corrupted their hearts, their knowledge of God became as callous as it was incorrect. Sinners have wrong thoughts (misinformation) about

God, but they also have wicked intentions (rebellion) against him (Gen 6:5; Rom 8:7–8). A corrupted, callous heart is a tenaciously evil force, and it is hearts such as these to which the prophets are appealing. Thus, the official task of a prophet is tremendously difficult!

Our Chief Prophet and Teacher, Jesus Christ, was fully aware of the sinful hardness of human hearts. The apostle John informs us that Christ “knew all people” and “needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man” (John 2:24–25; see also Mark 2:8; Luke 5:22). Still, that did not stop him from fulfilling the duties of his office. He spent his days preaching and teaching, to both large crowds and small groups of disciples (Matt 4:23; 5:1; 11:1). The crowds recognized that his teaching was different from the average Jewish rabbi, for he taught them as “one who had authority” (Matt 7:29). He also taught his disciples how all the OT Scriptures were being fulfilled in him (Luke 24:27). In this way, the Only-Begotten Son proclaimed the truth of his Father’s gracious plan of salvation in a deeper and fuller way than ever before (John 1:17–18; Heb 1:1–2). Those who hear the truth that the Son has proclaimed no longer need to yearn for some higher level of revelation after that. If we know the Son, we know the Father, too (John 14:8–11).

Yet it is striking that even after some three years of faithfully preaching as the Prophet, relatively few people truly believed in him. The group of believers numbered about 120 after Christ’s ascension. However, that number soon swelled by thousands upon thousands (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 21:20). Why this drastic change? The answer is: Pentecost and the Spirit whom Christ poured out from heaven (Acts 2:33). Our Chief Prophet knew, all along, that it would take more than just preaching and teaching to change hearts. Regeneration is accomplished by the Holy Spirit (John 3:6). For this reason, the Reformed confessions frequently put the Word and the Spirit together (LD 12, 21, 48; CoD 1.7; 3/4.6; 5.7). Thus, through his Word and Spirit, Christ our Prophet is still busy today bringing us sinners to rightly know God their Creator, as we were originally created to do (LD 3).

Those who believe in Christ, and thus share in his anointing, are also prophets (Acts 2:17). As Christians, we do not have the task of bringing to light all kinds of new revelations from God. For which Christian prophet could bring a message that somehow adds to, or goes beyond, what the *Chief* Prophet has already said? The teaching of Christ and his apostles has a unique, foundational character (Eph 2:19–21). Our prophetic task is not to re-do the foundation, but rather to hold fast to it, guarding the good deposit entrusted to us (2 Tim 1:14) and contending for “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Especially the phrase, “once for all,” reminds us that God’s revelation is complete, not open-ended.

Therefore, as Christian prophets we have the serious, yet delightful, task of encouraging and exhorting others, both in the public and private realm, with the truth of God’s Word. Just like the prophets of old, Christian prophets today should share God’s Word with those who are already in the household of faith, but also with those who do not presently serve the Lord. Every day millions of words are transmitted by mouth, by paper, and by wired and wireless communication. Over time these millions upon millions of words fade away into the literal, or digital, dust. Still, there is one Word that stands forever (Isa 40:8; 1 Pet 1:23–25). As true Christian prophets, we need to recognize the enormous difference between words and the Word. As true Christian prophets, we must also acknowledge that we have an official responsibility to confess that Word in every realm of our daily lives (Q&A 32). This is also why Bible study, both personal and communal, is so critical. We cannot correctly convey the Word, if we do not first properly understand it ourselves.

CHRIST AND CHRISTIAN AS PRIEST

The priestly office is often associated with Aaron and his sons. As expected with an office, the selection of this particular line of descendants was God’s choice, not their own (Exod 28:41). Their daily duties revolved around making sacrifices in the tabernacle and, later, the temple. Reading through the first seven chapters of Leviticus makes clear what a central role the priests had in all the sacrifices that were made.

To be more specific, the life of a priest involved service at two altars: the large, bronze altar in the courtyard (Exod 27:1–8) and the smaller, golden altar in the Holy Place (Exod 30:1–10). On the bronze altar the priests sacrificed animals for whole burnt offerings, guilt, sin, and fellowship or peace offerings (Lev 1–7). Each sacrifice had its own special purpose, but speaking generally, it was through these sacrifices, and in particular, by the blood that was shed, that sin was forgiven and fellowship was restored between God and his people. In the opening chapters of Leviticus, we are repeatedly reminded that the priest will make atonement for the people (e.g., Lev 1:4; 4:20, 31, 35; 5:6, 10). As an added blessing, once the obstacle of their sin’s guilt is removed, the communication between God’s people and the LORD can begin to flow once more. This is the function of the second altar upon which the priest burned incense, symbolizing the prayers of God’s people (Ps 141:1–2). Thus, the priest had two central, official tasks: making atonement and making intercession for God’s people. In this crucial role he stood as the mediator, the consecrated man between the Holy God and his sinful people.

Yet it was not always so. In the beginning communion between God and his people was unhindered. In Paradise, the LORD God came to walk alongside, and converse with, Adam and Eve (Gen 3:8). There were no altars in Eden, no sacrifices, no incense, and no restricted areas where only priests could go. In sum, there was a holy, intimate, delightfully love-filled communion between the Creator and his human creatures, between God the Father and his first two children. Again, the Catechism says it well when it states that man was created in God’s image so that he might “. . . heartily love him, and live with him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify him” (Q&A 6). This blessed fellowship was not merely tarnished by the fall into sin; it was radically severed. Not only were Adam and Eve sent out of the Garden, but the Lord also placed cherubim and a flaming, flashing sword at the entrance on the east side of the Garden. However, due to God’s mercy, what these angels closed off with fire, the priest and the altar opened up with blood. Worshipful communion in the temple was indeed a little piece of Paradise restored.

Still, as the apostle Paul points out, all those animal sacrifices and incense offerings were only a shadow (Col 2:17), and an ineffective silhouette at that (Heb 10:1). The redemptive reality came in Jesus Christ (Col 2:17), who is both the eternal High Priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb 6:20) and the Lamb who was sacrificed once for all (Heb 7:27). The true potency of this Priest's atoning work is noticed in its ability to cleanse even the innermost consciences of believers (Heb 9:9, 14; 10:22). A guilty conscience is a most tenacious thing. Even when others try to reassure us, our conscience is still busy accusing us (Q&A 60). Yet, praise be to God, there is a Priest who can effectively and eternally silence a guilty conscience, and that is the High Priest, Christ Jesus, who offered himself on the altar of Golgotha.

At the same time, Christ's ultimate sacrifice was not the end of his priestly activity. Even as the sons of Aaron would regularly walk from the bronze altar to the golden altar, there to continue with their official tasks, so the Son of God moved beyond the altar of Golgotha and was lifted up to the right-hand of his Father, there to make intercession for the prayers of God's people. This is crucial, for "we have no access to God except through the only Mediator and Advocate Jesus Christ the righteous" (BC 26). However, the other side of the coin is that having Christ as our mediator is having the best possible intercessor conceivable. We could not possibly find anyone who loves us more, is more powerful, or will be more readily heard by the Father than God's own, eternal Son! (BC 26) And *he* is the one bringing all our prayers to the Father.

Atonement accomplished by the Anointed One means restored fellowship with God for us. Ongoing intercession by the Anointed One means ready access to God's throne of grace in our time of need (Heb 4:16). Much to be thankful for! By the same token, those who share in the anointing of Christ should not be surprised that a sacrifice will be required of them as well. Since the Head does so much priestly work for the body, the body should be a priesthood energized in grateful response. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the classic text on the priesthood of all believers, 1 Peter 2:9, is directly preceded by an exhortation to be living, and therefore active, stones in God's spiritual house.

The activity of Christian priests, as one might expect, involves sacrifices, to be more precise, “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5). The apostle Paul further describes this as offering your bodies as “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1). You may ask, “What does this spiritual, living sacrifice look like in concrete terms?” The apostle answers, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2). Sacrifice, also spiritual sacrifice, involves pain, yes even death. Something must die in each child of God: the old, sinful nature (LD 33). Crucifying the old nature is a painful process that will involve many sacrifices.

Each one of these sacrifices can be aligned with a certain commandment. For example, sacrificing pride and learning to trust in God alone has everything to do with the first commandment (LD 34). When God’s people keep the day of rest holy and dedicated to worship, this means they have to sacrifice a day’s worth of work or recreational activities (LD 38). A child who lets go of his desire to follow his own instincts and instead submits to his parents’ good instruction is making a sacrifice in the realm of the fifth commandment (LD 39). In short, avoiding conformity with the world involves many sacrifices, which are not just interesting options, but which are part of our official, priestly duty to present ourselves as living sacrifices of thankfulness to the High Priest who sacrificed himself for our deliverance (LD 12).

In addition, priests should busy themselves with prayer. In fact, prayer is the most important part of the thanksgiving sacrifice that God requires of us (LD 45). Just as incense was regularly and constantly offered on the golden altar (Exod 30:8), so too Christian priests may not be negligent in their duty to pray, even as the apostle exhorts us, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17).

CHRIST AND CHRISTIANS AS KING

Human beings were created to be royal. No sooner did God announce his intention to create man and he immediately added, “And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing

that creeps on the earth” (Gen 1:26). Although their governing would always be subject to the King of kings and Lord of lords, it is nonetheless remarkable that human beings were charged to rule over such a wide swath of creation. Indeed, their jurisdiction included “all the earth.” Adam and Eve received royal status from God, but it came with an enormous agenda of responsibility!

Sadly, this privileged position of royalty was soon exchanged for the miserable futility of slavery. Rather than ruling over the creatures of the earth, Adam and Eve choose to be ruled by one of the fallen creatures of heaven, namely, Satan. As Jesus Christ later explained, “everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). He who was created royal should not have exchanged his crown for a pair of shackles. Yet that is precisely what Adam did when, along with his wife, he “gave ear to the words of the devil and wilfully *subjected* himself to sin and consequently to death and the curse” (BC 14; emphasis added).

Throughout the Old Testament, the same, miserable pattern repeated itself over and over again. The LORD gave his people leaders such as Moses and Joshua and Samuel. Later, when the Israelites refused to be content with theocracy (that is, rule by God), the LORD gave them a king like the other nations (1 Sam 8:5), first Saul and then David and his sons. Israel became a monarchy with a human king. Yet whether it was before the days of Saul or after, the key battle was always the same. Above all, it was a battle for the hearts and minds of God’s people, much more than it was a battle against this enemy or for that piece of land. Indeed, the most common crime during the whole era of the OT kings was idolatry. In this regard, too often the king himself was the one of the most hardened, serial idolaters in the whole land. King Ahab and his fascination with the idol Baal is a prime example.

Thus, when the long-awaited son of David, the King Jesus finally arrived, his goal was not to set up a new civil government to replace the Roman rulers. Rather, the first goal of his royal administration was to win the hearts and minds of God’s people for the truth of the gospel. He came to liberate them from slavery to sin and Satan, setting them free

through the truth (John 8:32). For this reason the Catechism says that our eternal King governs us by his Word and Spirit (LD 12). Similarly, when we pray for the coming of God's kingdom, we ask, in the very first place, that God would rule us by his Word and Spirit so that more and more we submit to him (LD 48).

However, this does not mean that the vast reach of ruling over all the earth has been forgotten. On the contrary, the now ascended King Jesus Christ rules over more than just all the earth. He rules, literally, over the entire universe (Col 1:15–17; Eph 1:19–23; Heb 2:8), including earth and heaven, everything visible and invisible. In the Last Adam, God's original royal charge to the First Adam is being more than fulfilled, as God's Son rules from heaven's throne at his right hand.

One day, Christians who share in his anointing will also share in his universal rule over all creation. However, that royal privilege will not be fully enjoyed until the end of time, when the saints and their Saviour will share an everlasting dominion over all creation (Dan 7:13–14 with 7:18). In the meantime, to share in Christ's royal anointing means that we must fight valiantly against every temptation to once again exchange the crown for shackles. This means strenuously resisting the lure of being re-enslaved to sin and Satan. Royalty comes with privileges, but it also includes responsibility. Right now our first royal responsibility is to ensure that with our whole life we serve the King of kings rather than submitting to the prince of demons.

In sum, by looking at the threefold office of Christ, it is evident that we have much more than a friend in Jesus. As ordained by the Father and anointed by the Spirit, Jesus Christ had a very diverse and difficult set of responsibilities to fulfil for us and our salvation. His official work includes teaching us (prophet), atoning and interceding for us (priest), and governing and protecting us (king). Not only does this indicate how much he has done, and continues to do for us, but it also reveals how deep our corruption goes. Sin has affected our knowledge and our desires, as well as our relationship with God, with each other and, yes, even with creation. Having plunged ourselves into such a widespread

misery, we certainly need a well-rounded Mediator. Such a Deliverer has been given: the Anointed One, who is simultaneously our Chief Prophet and Teacher, our Only High Priest, and our Eternal King.

Sharing in Christ's anointing raises Christian living to a completely new level. Reading the Bible, praying to God, and worshiping in church are all part of what it means to be a Christian. But it does not stop there. Communicating the truth of the gospel, sacrificing our sinful tendencies, interceding for others in prayer, and fighting against evil wherever it rears its corrupt head—these are all part of our daily, and *official*, duties. Having received a threefold office as prophets, priests, and kings, Christians have their work cut out for them. It is a good thing we have also received the Holy Spirit to help us get the tasks done.

Suggested Readings: Matthew 3:13–17; 1 Peter 2:9–12

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What is the difference between name and title? Why is this distinction important both in doctrinal study and in daily life?
2. In the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), our Deliverer is often simply called “Jesus.” In the rest of the NT, it is far more common to hear him referred to as “Jesus Christ,” “Christ Jesus,” or “the Lord Jesus Christ.” Is this progression merely a coincidence? If not, explain the significance of it.
3. List the key responsibilities that Christ had as he fulfilled his threefold office. Next, list the main implications that the threefold office has for Christians. Discuss practical ways in which we can, and ought to, fulfill each aspect of our threefold office.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. In your experience, what are some of the mental or social obstacles that hold Christians back from consciously thinking of themselves as Christian prophets, priests, and kings? What can we do to make fellow Christians more aware of, and active in, their God-given threefold office?

2. Today we hear a lot about self-esteem, or the lack thereof. Should Christians promote *self*-esteem or is that counterproductive to Christ-like humility (Phil 2:3–5)? Would it be more helpful for us to speak about threefold office rather than self-esteem? How might that help a nineteen-year-old young lady who is very down on herself and her ability to do meaningful and worthwhile things with her life? Are there any disadvantages to emphasizing threefold office rather than self-esteem?
3. If being a Christian prophet involves conveying God’s truth into today’s world, how well do we have to know the truth before we start sharing it? Should we be trained before we fulfill our prophetic responsibilities? If so, for how long? Or is most prophetic training accomplished on the job, so to speak?
4. What holds us back from making the spiritual sacrifices that we really should make? What can we do personally to help ourselves over the hurdle and do what a “royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9) should do? What can we do to help each other over that same hurdle?
5. God created human beings with the mandate to rule over all creation (Gen 1:28). Does this mandate still hold true today, especially for those who are being renewed in Christ? How can Christians today effectively “subdue” the earth (Gen 1:28) without repeatedly abusing it? Can Christians be involved in environmentalism, also called the green movement? If so, how?

Jason van Vliet