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The Triple Cure

Jesus Christ - Our Prophet, Priest and King

By Kim Riddlebarger

The diagnosis is not very good: we are ignorant, guilty, and corrupt. As a litany of biblical texts reveals, we find ourselves as fallen sinners ravaged by this threefold consequence of our sins. Our foolish hearts are darkened (Rom 1:21) and our thoughts are continually evil (Gn 6:5). Our minds are clouded by sin and ignorant of the things of God (Eph 4:17-18), although in our folly we glory in our great knowledge and wisdom. We have exchanged God's truth for a lie (Rom 1:25), and our minds are "blinded by the god of this age" (2 Cor 4:4). Like a blind man in a drunken stupor, pitifully groping his way through life, so our sin has blinded us to the truth of God. Intoxicated with our own self-righteousness, we stumble through life seeking to justify ourselves before God.

We labor under the tremendous weight of guilt—the penalty for our many infractions of the law of God. While many are quite adept at ignoring God's just verdict against them, many others feel like they will buckle under the weight of God's heavy hand. Not only are they guilty for their own individual violations of God's law in thought, word, and deed, but they are also rendered guilty for their participation in the sin of Adam, whose own guilt has been imputed to all those who spring from his loins (Rom 5:12, 18-19). While we may delude ourselves into thinking that we have sinned against our neighbors only, David knew that this was not true. "Against you and you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps 51:4), was his plaintive cry to his God. Because of our guilt, there is no way we can dare stand in the presence of God. "If you O Lord kept a record of sins, who could stand?" (Ps 130:3).

But ignorance and the guilt of sin are not the only things in view as we survey the Scriptures. We also suffer from the destructive pollution of this inherited sinful condition, which infects every part of us from the moment of conception. Born in sin as the Psalmist declares (Ps 51:5), there is no good residing in us (Ps 14:1-3). Our bodies, which are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps 139:14), become instruments to act out the wickedness that would otherwise lie hidden in our hearts (Rom 6:13). It is the guilt and the pollution from this sin that renders us so miserable. Life apart from God's forgiveness is described in the language of sickness—the trembling, sweaty weakness of a sick body trying to fight off a high fever (Ps 32:3-4). We have no peace with either God or neighbor (Rom 3:17), and we are "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the

world" (Eph 2:12). Thus sin leaves us ignorant, guilty, and polluted, and therefore utterly miserable. Indeed, while the diagnosis is bad, the prognosis is far worse, for this disease is always fatal and earthly doctors have no cure. There is, however, one account of a glorious and miraculous cure from this disease: The good news of the Gospel proclaims that while "this is impossible with men," nevertheless, with God, "all things are possible!"

The Development of the Threefold Office

It was John Calvin who brought the *munus triplex*, or the so-called "threefold office" of Christ into prominence. Picked up by most of the subsequent Reformed tradition, and adopted by many Lutheran theologians as well, the threefold office presents Jesus Christ as prophet, priest, and king, who in his saving work, fulfilled all the anointed offices of the Old Testament.¹ Calvin adopted this model to accomplish several things. First, it helped him give shape to his overall Christology, which focuses primarily on Christ's work in terms of being mediator of a covenant of redemption, the one chosen by God to be the savior of the elect. Second, he used the threefold office to bind together Christ's person as the eternal Son of God, fully human and fully divine, to his work as redeemer, as seen in his names "Christ" and "Messiah," which themselves are indicative of his being the "anointed one."² This means that for Calvin, "the Son of God, therefore, is not properly called Christ apart from his office, for it is there, in his official capacity, that he manifests as the true fulfillment of the offices of the Old Testament his threefold work as prophet, priest, and king."³ This model also offers an excellent way to connect redemptive history to systematic theology. Since Christ's three offices, prophet, priest, and king, "represent the three offices of ancient Israel to which men were appointed as servants of God," Calvin could connect the incarnation directly to Christ's work as mediator. This means that "the prophet, the king, and the priest are united in Christ, are perfected, and are thereby fulfilled and brought to conclusion in the one who is both king and priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."⁴ In the threefold office, Calvin offers an excellent and compelling way to make sense of a large block of diverse biblical data.

Later Reformed theologians, such as Francis Turretin, introduce the threefold office of our Lord as the divinely revealed solution to the threefold disease of ignorance, guilt, and pollution described above. It is Christ, as prophet, priest, and king, who offers the threefold cure to our fatal disease. Turretin sets out the threefold office as the remedy for human sin as follows:

¹ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker Book House, 1985), 197.

² Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 31 ff.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 32.

The threefold misery of men introduced by sin-ignorance, guilt, and tyranny and bondage by sin-required this conjunction of a threefold office. Ignorance is healed by the prophetic; guilt by the priestly; the tyranny and corruption of sin by the kingly office. Prophetic light scatters the darkness of error; the merit of the Priest takes away guilt and procures a reconciliation for us; the Power of the King removes the bondage of sin and death. The Prophet shows God to us; the Priest leads us to God; and the King joins us together and glorifies us with God. The Prophet enlightens the mind by the Spirit of illumination; the Priest by the Spirit of consolation tranquilizes the heart and conscience; the King by the Spirit of sanctification subdues rebellious affections.⁵

Turretin's conception is not only eloquently stated-certainly powerful evidence against the argument that scholastic theology lacks devotion-but it effectively captures the thrust of the biblical data concerning Christ's person and work to rescue us from the horrible consequences of sin.

Christ Our Prophet

Christ's prophetic office means, in effect, that Christ represents God to man. Jesus is the light of the world (Jn 1:4-5), who comes to show us God the Father (Jn 14:9). Under the Old Covenant Christ taught us by means of types and shadows, the history of redemption, and by his providential care over the people of Israel. Since the Old Testament prophet is "one who sees things...who receives revelations, who is in the service of God, particularly as a messenger who speaks in His name,"⁶ our Lord Jesus exercised these functions both before and after his incarnation (1 Pt 1:11). It was Moses who foretold of a great prophet that "the Lord your God will raise up for you among your brothers. You must listen to him" (Dt 18:15). And it is Peter, who immediately after the birth of the Church, applies this passage to our Lord (Acts 3:22-23). Jesus speaks of himself as such a prophet (Lk 13:33), and our Lord expressly claims to speak only what his father has told him to say (Jn 12:49-50; 14:10, 24; 15:15; 17:8, 20). Jesus speaks of the future (Mt 24:3-35), and speaks with an amazing authority unlike all others (Mt 7:29). Indeed, our Lord's words are backed by the power of God, for his mighty works serve to confirm the truth of his message (Mt 21:11, 46; Lk 7:16, 24:19; Jn 3:2, 4:19, 7:40, 9:17). In John 6:14 we are told that "after the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.'"

Christ's prophetic work does not cease, however, with the end of his earthly ministry at his Ascension. As Louis Berkhof notes, Christ "continues His prophetic activity through the operation of the Holy Spirit. His teachings are both verbal and factual, that is, He teaches not only by verbal communications, but also by the facts of revelation, such as the incarnation, His

⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 2 (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1994), 393.

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 358.

atoning death, the resurrection and ascension."⁷ Christ is the one who sends the Holy Spirit, and as the Spirit of Christ, he is the one who "will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (Jn 16:8). As Christ is the Word incarnate, and the central figure in biblical revelation, so too we cannot divorce the work of his Spirit from the written word. Since Christ fulfills the office of prophet, and since he continues to speak to us through his word-and only through his word-the Reformed are very reticent to give any credence to supposed "words from God," or "words of knowledge" from modern day schwärmer such as Pat Robertson or Benny Hinn who repeatedly make such claims to speak forth Spirit-led utterances.

Christ Our Priest

The priestly office of Christ occupies a major place in the New Testament and includes not only a discussion of the office itself, but also of Christ's sacrificial death to redeem sinners from their sin. The key passage in the New Testament, Hebrews 5:1 and following, lays out the characteristics of a true priest. First, "every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God" (v. 1). Second, such a priest is appointed by God (v. 4). Third, the high priest "offers gifts and sacrifices for sins" (v. 1). In addition, the priest makes intercession for the people (7:25), blessing them in the name of God (Lv 9:22). Clearly, Jesus Christ is the high priest par excellence.

The Old Testament predicted a coming Redeemer. The Psalmist records God saying about his chosen one: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'you are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek'" (Ps 110:4). Zechariah tells us that the coming Redeemer "will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne" (Ps 6:13). There is no doubt, as Berkhof notes, that "the Old Testament priesthood, and particularly the high priest, clearly prefigured a priestly Messiah."⁸

The author of the book of Hebrews is clearly cognizant of this. Though he is the only New Testament writer who applies the term to our Lord, he repeatedly speaks of Jesus as a priest. We are told "to fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess" (Heb 3:1). We are informed that we "have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God" (Heb 4:14). Christ has not taken upon himself "the glory of becoming a high priest" (Heb 5:5), for the author applies the words of Psalm 110:4 to him: "he has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 6:20). Jesus is the kind of high priest "who meets our needs-one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people," for this high priest "sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself" (Heb 7:27). Thus Christians are able to take heart, for our high priest, when he

⁷ Ibid., 359.

⁸ Ibid., 362.

had completed his work, "sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb 8:1).

A great deal of biblical data is devoted to Christ's work as high priest, but we can only briefly survey it here.⁹ The Scriptures point us in several directions. One aspect of this, which we may easily overlook but which is extremely important to notice, is that not only does Christ the high priest offer an all-sufficient sacrifice for sin, but he also is himself the all-sufficient sacrifice for sin! We get a strong hint of this in the Mosaic epoch of biblical revelation, through the nature of the sacrifices that were instituted, and which themselves were mere types and shadows, pointing us to the Messiah yet to come. The sacrifices offered during this time temporarily expiated the guilt of the sins of the people through the sacrifice of the substitute—in this case, an animal who was offered up to God. But the Psalmist, who records for us the prophetic words of the Messiah himself, takes this further. "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire...burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart'" (Ps 40:6-8). The Messiah indicates that his own coming sacrificial death will supersede the Old Testament sacrificial system.¹⁰

The New Testament quite frequently and powerfully makes this very point—Jesus Christ's sacrificial death is the fulfillment of the types and shadows of the Mosaic system. The author of Hebrews, as but one example, makes it very clear that Jesus Christ, through his one sacrifice, has done something that the blood of bulls and goats could never accomplish. While the blood of animals could not take away sin, the blood of the Messiah, on the other hand, is that through which "we have been made holy" (Heb 11:10). This is a major theme throughout the New Testament.

Just as Christ's prophetic work did not cease when he completed his earthly ministry, so neither has his priestly work. Though Christ took his place at the right hand of his Father, because his redemptive work was finished (Heb 11:12), Jesus Christ presently intercedes for us when we sin (1 Jn 2:1-2). While we are correct to focus on what Christ has done for us as our high priest, we must not forget those things he is doing for us even now. He prays for our sanctification (Jn 17:17). He is now our "great high priest who has gone through the heavens," so too we can now "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:14-16). Even now, our great high priest is building us "into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pt 2:5). What comfort we can take, knowing that our Lord is in heaven, preparing for us to see his glory (Jn 17:24). For the great high priest who intercedes for us never

⁹ One of the best treatments of this is found in Leon Morris' *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982); and in a more popular version, *The Atonement* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985).

¹⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 364.

sleeps nor wearies, he never prays without full effect, and he is ever mindful of our continuing struggles with the world, the flesh, and the devil (Heb 2:18). Jesus Christ is both the author and the finisher of our faith (Heb 12:2). He is our great high priest and the good shepherd, who even now guards his flock. No one shall ever snatch us from his hand (Jn 10:28-29), and nothing will ever separate us from his love (Rom 8:37-39).

Christ Our King

The biblical writers would have been quite mystified, I think, at much of the evangelical discussion about "making Christ Lord"-as though it was through a decision on our part that Christ becomes "the Lord over our lives." And they certainly would have been perplexed by those who insist on reading the kingdom language of the New Testament through the grid of the American nationalism of the Christian right, or the moralistic social gospel of the Christian left. They would, I think, be equally confused by our dispensational brethren, who insist on undercutting the present reign of Christ by arguing that Christ's kingly office (especially the *regnum gratiae*-the "kingdom of grace") does not come fully into view until a future millennial age commences and at long last Christ supposedly begins to exercise his full authority from the earthly city of Jerusalem. Most of this confusion comes from a failure to understand this third office of Christ, his kingly rule.

The Scriptures plainly declare that "the Lord has established his throne in heaven and his kingdom rules over it" (Ps 103:19). We don't make Christ anything-He is the Lord over his creation. His throne is in heaven, and he is king over creation. This kingship is therefore to be seen as "his official power to rule all things in heaven and on earth, for the glory of God, and for the execution of God's purpose of salvation."¹¹ If Christ is not presently ruling in this capacity, we must ask ourselves, just who exactly is minding the store? Reformed theologians usually argue that there are two aspects to this kingly rule. The first is Christ's *regnum potentiae* (kingdom of power) and the second is the *regnum gratiae*. Unlike the dispensationalists, who argue that Christ delays the full manifestation of his rule in this present dispensation, the Reformed argue that Christ presently exercises full dominion over all, even now. He is king and his kingdom is presently a kingdom both of grace and of power. He is in full control and he is ordering all of human history as he sees fit. This means that at his Ascension, Jesus Christ ascended to the right hand of his father and even now rules over all of creation (*regnum potentiae*) and over his church (*regnum gratiae*).

In the kingdom of grace, Christ is seen to rule the church of which he himself is head. As such, this rule is a spiritual rule, since it is exercised in a spiritual realm. As Berkhof puts it, "it is established in the hearts and lives of believers."¹² The New Testament repeatedly speaks of Christ as "head of the church" (Eph 1:22, 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:19). Christ's rule over his church is

¹¹ Ibid., 406.

¹² Ibid.

closely related to the mystical union formed between Christ and the church, which the Scriptures describe as his "body" (1 Cor 12:27). Christ's rule over this kingdom is based on his redemptive work. "No one is a citizen of this kingdom by virtue of his humanity. Only the redeemed have that honor and privilege."¹³ It is a spiritual kingdom, so it has no flag, no world headquarters, and no post office box. But it is certainly and powerfully present wherever Christ's people gather to hear God's word proclaimed and to receive the sacraments (Rom 14:17). This kingdom is identical to that which the New Testament repeatedly calls the "Kingdom of God." Lest we forget, this kingdom is a conquering kingdom (Mt 12:28), though we err greatly if we connect the advance of this kingdom to cultural, economic, or political institutions (Jn 18:36). The wicked will not inherit this kingdom (Gal 5:21), though our own children, seen by the world as "the least of these," are already members through baptism (Lk 18:16). It is a glorious kingdom (1 Thes 2:12), and despite what some may say, it is a present reality (Mt 3:2). It is a kingdom, which as the Creed declares, "has no end" (2 Pt 1:11).

The kingdom of power, on the other hand, refers to Christ's rule or dominion over all of creation. In this case, as creator of all, he is also Lord (Col 1:16-17). He orders the affairs of nations (Is 40:17), and controls the lives and destinies of individuals (Acts 14:15-17, 17:24-27). Quite simply, the Scripture puts it this way: "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Ps 115:3). This serves as the basis for understanding all of history as ultimately serving the purpose of the redemption of God's people, since we know that God is working together everything after the purpose of his will (Eph 1:11) and that he is ordering all things, so that human history is racing to a great and final climax, the return of our Lord to Earth for the resurrection and the final judgment. It is this kingly rule of Christ that gives us comfort in the midst of the tumult of the signs of the end of the age: earthquakes, disease, wars and rumors of wars.

Some Final Thoughts

The threefold office of Christ has profound ramifications for the Christian life. First and foremost, this model enables us to connect the work of Christ, who has secured our redemption (which we discover only in the pages of Scripture), with our present experience and struggles as Christians. As Calvin noted, the threefold office of Christ is certainly one of the best ways to explain our Lord's redemptive work, which by design overcame our ignorance, our guilt, and our corruption, and which even now provides us with illumination, redemption, and hope in the present.

Take for example, Christ's prophetic office. Christ was revealed in type and shadow in the pages of the Old Testament. Though he was the central character, he remained hidden. In the New Testament, however, our Lord steps out from the shadows of darkness and assumes center stage in the drama of redemption (Gal 4:4). "That was then," some may protest, "but what does he do for us after his Ascension when he had finished his earthly ministry?" How does his prophetic office help us in the midst of our current struggles?

¹³ Ibid. 407.

Perhaps it would be useful to think of it this way: If the Scripture bears witness to Christ (Jn 5:39), then the Holy Spirit, who is Scripture's divine author (2 Tim 3:16), will open our minds and our hearts to hear our Lord's voice as we read his word (Jn 16:12-15; Acts 16:14). This is what theologians have historically spoken of as illumination. Since we are blind to the things of God, the Holy Spirit must provide the understanding we need through the Scriptures. Thus, Christ our prophet certainly speaks to us today through the pages of his word. In fact, whenever the minister of the word opens the Scripture for us, there is a profound sense in which Christ our prophet is speaking to us through his word every bit as much as if he himself were standing in our presence and speaking these words audibly. Therefore in Scripture, God's word written, we find a voice that is certain, not like the extemporaneous musings of those today who claim to speak for God.

The same pattern holds true for Christ's priestly work. Not only has Christ done what is necessary for our salvation through his sinless life (his active obedience) and through his sacrifice for sin (passive obedience), but at this very moment he has assumed his place at the right hand of his Father where he now intercedes for us. What comfort we derive from the knowledge that he is there as our advocate and friend, pleading our case whenever we sin! It is also important to note that since he has been tempted in all the ways that we have been tempted, our great high priest not only knows our weakness-and is there to help us when we ask-but in addition he has promised us that he will never give us more than we can bear and that he will always provide us a way of escape (1 Cor 10:13).

Christ's kingly office provides us with a wealth of comfort and assurance. For while the nations rage one against another; while the earth groans beneath our feet; while there is sickness, disease, and economic hardship (Mt 24:3 ff.) Even now our Lord is ruling and reigning, until he makes his enemies his footstool (1 Cor 15:22-27). And so while unbelievers may look around at these world conditions and see the apparent chaos as an excuse to scoff, saying "Where is this 'coming' he promised?" (2 Pt 3:3-4), the believer can take heart, for the signs of the end are exactly that. The tumult we see around us is, in fact, proof that Christ is reigning and that he is directing all of history toward a great and final consummation, when he will come with great glory with his angels, as the great conquering king (1 Thes 4:13-5:11).

This then, is our hope and our comfort-Jesus Christ is the final prophet, the great high priest, and the conquering king. There is a miraculous cure for the disease of ignorance, guilt, and pollution after all. It is what is known by some Reformed theologians as "the triple cure." As Calvin said, in Christ "God has fulfilled what he has promised: that the truth of his promises would be realized in the person of the Son. Believers have found to be true Paul's saying that 'all the promises of God find their yea and amen in Christ'" (*Institutes*, II.ix.2).

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