

## The Radical Threefold Office of Christ and Christians

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*Why are you called a Christian? Because I am a member of Christ by faith and thus share in his anointing so that I may as prophet confess his name, as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to him, and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with him eternally over all creatures (Lord's Day 12 Q&A 32)*

The paragraph printed above is from the Heidelberg Catechism, a guide for teaching biblical doctrine, which was published back in 1563. It's a rather radical teaching, wouldn't you say? When the Catechism was first published, the ecclesiastical scene was still dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. And in that church, there is the clergy, who are all male priests, and there is the laity, who are all the rest of the people. But here comes this radical Heidelberg Catechism, and it dares to announce that every, single, genuine believer is a priest in Christ—both male *and female*, both older *and younger*. Imagine that: a church full of priests! Now that's a radical thought.

But it doesn't stop there. In the sixteenth century there was a certain group of prophets called the Zwickau prophets. They did not have a very good reputation. They were known in German as *die Schwärmer* which means "radical enthusiasts." But now, here comes the Catechism, and it says, not only do we have a few prophets in Zwickau, but we have a church full of them. That even out-radicalizes the radicals, wouldn't you say?

And to top it all off, the Catechism was so audacious as to affirm that those who truly believe in Christ are kings. They are real royalty. Now in 1563 Germany had a good number of princes, and it even had an emperor, Ferdinand I. And it was clear, both by clothing and social standing, who did, and who did not, belong to the royal class. And was the Catechism actually saying that every believing peasant—every Hans, Peter, and Klaus—was, in some sense, a king? Could the princes tolerate such a thought? Could the peasants even wrap their minds around such a teaching? Rather radical for the 16<sup>th</sup> century, wouldn't you say?

But not only for the sixteenth century, the same applies to the twenty-first century. Because let's be honest, how many of us today go about our daily duties, walking and talking as prophets, priests and kings in Christ? Is that something we consciously consider? Is that something we act upon? Or is Lord's Day 12 too radical for our modern sensitivities as well?

***The Threefold Office in Scripture***

### *Christ: "The Anointed One"*

As we turn to Scripture, let's begin with the office of Christ as king. Kings in the OT were anointed. Consider, for example, King David who was anointed by Samuel (1 Sam 16:13) and King Solomon who was anointed by Zadok (1 Kgs 1:39). Furthermore, the covenant that the LORD made with David clearly pointed forward to one of his sons who would reign on the throne of David forever (2 Sam 7:13; Ps 45:6-7; Ps 89:4, 28-29; Isa 9:6). In the fullness of time, then, Jesus was born as this great royal son of David (Matt 1:1, 20; 2:2; Luke 2:4, 11). The apostle Paul also confirms this when he declares the Son of God to be the one "who was descended from David according to the flesh" (Rom 1:4; cf. Rev 1:5).

Then, let's turn to the office of priest. Again, it is easy to establish that OT priests were anointed. Aaron was anointed by his younger brother Moses (Lev 8:12), and by the command of the LORD, so were all the sons of Aaron as well (Exod 30:30). Then Psalm 110 declares, and Hebrews 7-8 confirms, that Jesus, too, was a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Indeed, Melchizedek had the special honour of holding a double-office; he was the king-priest of Salem (Heb 7:1). It stands to reason, then, that Jesus Christ, who followed in his footsteps, was also an anointed king-priest.

And that brings us to the last part of the threefold office: the prophetic aspect. Only once do we read that Elijah anointed Elisha, son of Shaphat, as his prophetic successor (1 Kgs 19:16). So, admittedly, the connection between anointing and prophets is not as frequent as it is with kings and priests, but it is still there. And it appears again in Isaiah concerning the servant whom "the LORD has anointed... to preach good news to the poor... to proclaim freedom for the captives... [and] to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of the vengeance of our God" (Isa 61:1-3). All this preaching and proclaiming is clearer a prophetic duty, and it was fulfilled by Jesus Christ, shortly after he was anointed by the Holy Spirit as he came up from the River Jordan. Following his temptation in the wilderness he went to his home synagogue in Nazareth and read these very words from Isaiah 61 and declared "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). In saying that Christ declared himself to be a prophet (v 24).

### *Christians: Sharing in Christ's Anointing*

Now it is one thing to acknowledge that Christ has a threefold anointing as prophet, priest and king, but does this apply also to *Christians*? Yes, it does, and this fits with the NT teaching that Christ is the sovereign Head over his church, which is his body (1 Cor 12:12-27; Eph 4:15-16; 5:30). When the head of Aaron the high priest was anointed, the oil flowed down onto his robe, that is his body (Ps 133:2).

Likewise, when the Head, Jesus Christ, was anointed with the Holy Spirit, this anointing flowed down to the members of his body who now share in that anointing. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Day made that abundantly clear (Acts 2:33). By the Spirit, both Christ and the church, both Head and body, are anointed into the threefold office.

For this reason on Pentecost Day Peter explained that now all of God's people would prophesy. Acts 2:18 says, "Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy." Neither should this surprise us too much, for already in the OT Moses did not hesitate to shout out publicly, "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" Moreover, these Christian prophets also hold the priestly office, as the apostle Peter explicitly says in 1 Pet 2:9: "But you are a chosen people, a royal *priesthood*." Right here, as expected, we also see the figure of Melchizedek casting his blessed shadow over the Christian priesthood. For even as that ancient priest of God Most High was also king of Salem (Heb 7:1), so here in 1 Pet 2:9 the Christian priests are *royal* priests. Later, the apostle John sets his stamp of approval on this when he declares that "God has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (Rev 1:6; see also 5:10; 20:6).

So, on the one hand, when LD 12 speaks about the threefold office of Christians, it is simply giving straightforward, scriptural teaching. On the other hand, it *is* still a radical teaching which most Christians do not consciously apply to their daily lives.

### **The Threefold Office in Daily Life**

#### *Prophet*

As LD 12 indicates, being a Christian prophet involves confessing the Name of Christ. Sounds simple, doesn't it? And for many it boils down to saying, both privately and publicly, "I believe in Jesus as my Saviour." That's a great place start, but it's a terrible place to finish because there is so much more involved than that. Our prophetic duty to "confess his name" is connected to the third commandment concerning the use of God's name. LD 36 explains, "we must use the holy name of God only with fear and reverence, so that we may *rightly confess him*, call upon him, and praise him in all our words and works." Notice the comprehensive nature of the task: rightly confess and praise him *in all our words and all our works*. Obviously, being a Christian prophet is not a part-time job.

And the size of the task only increases when we move from the third commandment to the first petition, found in LD 47. “What is the first petition? *Hallowed be your name.* That is, Grant us first of all that we may rightly know you, and sanctify, glorify, and praise you *in all your works* in which shine forth your almighty power, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, mercy and truth.” In other words, confessing the name of Christ involves rightly knowing and faithfully acknowledging all of *God’s* words and works in all of *our* words and works. No small task!

Properly understood, then, LD 12 urges all Christians to studiously avoid the temptation to be a kindergarten Christians. True, kindergarten is important. Everyone has to learn their ABCs and their 123s, also their spiritual ABCs and 123s. Yet, once that is complete, “Let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity” (Heb 6:1). After all, Christ’s Prophetic office is all about fullness, and we share in *his* anointing. In the church today, there is still far too little fullness of knowledge and far too much theological illiteracy. And if we want to be honest about what the name Christian really means, that needs to change. Youth and adults, male and female, all Christians should strive for, and thrive on, a mature understanding of Christian doctrine, and then be prophetically bold enough to speak about it, too—even when it is uncomfortable.

### *Priest*

With such a great High Priest as Jesus Christ as our intercessor there is every reason to be confident, in him, that we can fulfill our priestly duty and “present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to him” (LD 12). That mention of the word “thankfulness” immediately pushes us forward to the third part of the Catechism: “Our Thankfulness.” That part is sub-divided into two sections: the first concerning obedience to the law, and the second concerning prayer. These, then, are the two focal points of our living sacrifice of thankfulness: first, consistently obeying all Ten Commandments out of gratitude and second, continually offering up the incense of prayer in all circumstances. Both of these are priestly “musts.” LD 32 leads into the Catechism’s treatment of the law and it begins with this question: “why *must* we yet do good works?” Similarly LD 45 starts the Catechism’s treatment of prayer by asking, “why is prayer *necessary* for Christians?” Yes, why necessary *for Christians*? Because Christians, after all, are priests who have a duty to offer the sacrifice of thankful obedience and the incense of humble prayer. Christians who want to live up to their name have to take their official duties seriously.

Perhaps you are inclined to say, “Yes, but my obedience and my prayers are too unclean, too compromised, too inconsistent. I am not worthy to be part of that ‘royal priesthood.’” However, when

we remember that we are only priests *in Christ*, sharing in *his* anointing, then we may also be confident that the righteousness of Christ is sufficient to cover our weaknesses and make us worthy priests in God's sight.

### *King*

Christ rules in a unique way: not by political power, not by military power, not by mystical power either, but by his Word and Spirit (LD 12 Q&A 31). Following through with this, in LD 48, the Catechism explains the second petition in these terms, "That is: So rule us by your Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to you." Sometimes the kingdom of Christ looks so small and insignificant. What is the church of Christ compared to the political superpowers and financial stock exchanges` of this world? If we live by sight, the answer is: not much. However, if we live by faith, the Catechism reminds us that "those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (2 Kgs 6:16).

Just as the church today still has too many Christians who linger in kindergarten, so, too, it contains too many who remain cowardly. To be Christian does not mean cowering in a corner somewhere, fervently hoping that the devil and this evil world would just leave us alone for a while. To be a Christian is to be royal. To hold royal office requires courage. The *sword* of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, is an offensive weapon. Royal Christians are called to bravely slice through the devil's schemes, and leave them in a heap of tattered shreds on the ground. Royal Christians are to stand up against the world, fearlessly calling a spade a spade and a sin a sin. The prince of darkness may be grim, but as Martin Luther sang, "we tremble not for him." The dynamic duo of the Word and the Spirit out-powers the diabolical duo of sin and the devil any day of the week. Christ our King assures us of that.

### **Conclusion**

And so, we come full circle, back to the genuinely radical nature of the threefold office of Christ and Christians, as confessed in LD 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

In the first place, let's not think too small of Jesus Christ. He is not just our friend. He is not only our Lord. He is our Chief Prophet and Teacher, our Only High Priest, and our eternal King. And the more we come to appreciate *everything* that he does for us in his threefold office, the more we are convinced that "salvation is not to be sought or found in anyone else" (LD 11). Why would you even *contemplate* going elsewhere? As LD 12 makes so blessedly clear: Christ, the Anointed One, really is our all-in-all.

In the second place, let's not think too small of ourselves as a Christian. No, this is not an invitation to boast in ourselves. Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord. But there are still too many Christians who lack a sense of purpose in life. They wonder, "Why I am here? And what am I supposed to be doing?" Sometimes, even Christians begin to feel worthless and useless.

Is it worthless to be a prophet? Is it useless to be a priest? Is it meaningless to be a king? Not at all! The church of Christ, which is the assembly of true believers, is full of prophets, priest and kings. And it's high time that the members of the church were both comforted and challenged by this truth. Yes, it's radical, but it's also true, because the threefold office of Christians is completely rooted in the threefold office of Christ. It's time for Christians everywhere to begin living up to the real, radical meaning of their name.