

THE WORK OF CHRIST AND THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN (5)

The Role of the Priest

A. Introduction

1. The work of Christ is the term that is used to describe all Christ did when He came to earth to save us by dying on the cross, all that He is doing now that He has risen from the dead and ascended to God's right hand, and all that He will do when He returns.

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have spoken of Christ's work in His roles as a Prophet, as a Priest, and as a King.

Heidelberg Catechism (Q31):

Q. Why is he called Christ, that is, Anointed?

A. Because he has been ordained by God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption; our only High Priest, who by the one sacrifice of his body has redeemed us, and who continually intercedes for us before the Father; and our eternal King, who governs us by his Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.

The reason the church has spoken of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King is because that sums up well what God's Word teaches.

2. However, the roles of prophet, priest and king, not only are a helpful way of understanding the work of Christ, they are also a helpful way of understanding the life of a Christian.

Christians imitate Christ in each of these roles, albeit in a lesser way.

Heidelberg Catechism (Q32):

Q. Why are you called a Christian?

A. 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 the life, and hereafter reign with him eternally over all creatures.

"Remember this: The work of Christ and the life of a Christian can be summed up in three words – "prophet", "priest", and "king." (Kevin DeYoung)

3. To help us understand what the Bible teaches about the work of Christ and the life of the Christian as prophet, priest, and king, we're going to use some of the different theological tools which are at our disposal.

Exegetical Theology Tool: we use this tool when we study and seek to understand individual texts of the Bible.

Biblical Theology Tool: we use this tool when we trace how a theme develops and progresses through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

Systematic Theology Tool: we use this tool when we sum up what the whole Bible teaches on a specific doctrine.

Pastoral (or Practical) Theology Tool: we use this tool when we apply what we learn to the life of the church and individual Christians.

4. So far, we've seen that a prophet is someone who speaks the words that God gives them to speak.

"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him." (Deuteronomy 18:18)

With the establishment of the nation of Israel, the role of prophet was occupied by specific individuals. This didn't mean that there was no 'prophetic' role for all of God's people.

Yet with Israel's failure to do this and be a light to the nations, and the inability of the Old Testament prophets to change their hearts so that they would perform this prophetic role they were meant to have, a future prophet was needed, who would not only speak God's words but who would cause God's people to as well.

"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him." (Deuteronomy 18:15)

God promised that this prophet would come, and in Jesus, He did. Jesus does His work as prophet, by making known the Father and by showing us the way to the Father. Jesus also, does His prophetic work by changing His people so they would speak God's words, restoring the prophetic role they were created to have.

The church now has prophetic ministry in making disciples by faithfully proclaiming the gospel and calling people to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus, by baptising them, and by teaching them to obey everything He has commanded. The individual Christian now has a prophetic ministry too, in faithfully understanding and using the Word of God.

B. What is a priest?

1. A priest is someone who mediates between God and people.

The people of Israel as a kingdom of priests were to intercede between God and the nations.

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:4-6)

But within the people of Israel, the role of priest was occupied by specific individuals too.

2. They needed to be from the right tribe, and from the right family in that tribe.

The priests will come from the tribe of Levi and will be descendants of Aaron.

"Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so that they may serve me as priests." (Exodus 28:1)

But any of Aaron's descendants who have a physical defect were disqualified from serving in this way.

"The LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: 'For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the offerings made to the LORD by fire. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God.'" (Leviticus 21:16-21)

3. They needed to be clean.

The priests are washed on the outside with water.

"Moses said to the assembly, "This is what the LORD has commanded to be done." Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward and washed them with water." (Leviticus 8:5-6)

The priests are cleansed of the polluting effects of sin by sacrifice.

"He then presented the ram for the burnt offering, and Aaron and his sons laid their hands on its head. Then Moses slaughtered the ram and sprinkled the blood against the altar on all sides. He

cut the ram into pieces and burned the head, the pieces and the fat. He washed the inner parts and the legs with water and burned the whole ram on the altar as a burnt offering, a pleasing aroma, an offering made to the LORD by fire, as the LORD commanded Moses." (Leviticus 8:18-21)

The washing and sacrifices clean them so they can serve God as priests.

4. They needed to wear the right clothes.

These clothes had a glory and beauty to them communicating to the people that they were representing God.

"Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him dignity and honour. Tell all the skilled men to whom I have given wisdom in such matters that they are to make garments for Aaron, for his consecration, so that he may serve me as priest. These are the garments they are to make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a woven tunic, a turban and a sash. They are to make these sacred garments for your brother Aaron and his sons, so that they may serve me as priests. Make them use gold, and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and fine linen." (Exodus 28:2-5)

"Make tunics, sashes and headbands for Aaron's sons, to give them dignity and honour." (Exodus 28:40)

"He put the tunic on Aaron, tied the sash around him, clothed him with the robe and put the ephod on him. He also tied the ephod to him by its skilfully woven waistband; so it was fastened on him. He placed the breastpiece on him and put the Urim and Thummim in the breastpiece. Then he placed the turban on Aaron's head and set the gold plate, the sacred diadem, on the front of it, as the LORD commanded Moses." (Leviticus 8:7-9)

The clothes the High Priest wore also communicated to the people that he was representing them. The Ephod had two onyx stones fastened to it containing the names of the sons of Israel, and the breastpiece had twelve stones mounted on it.

"Take two onyx stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel in the order of their birth – six names on one stone and the remaining six on the other. Engrave the names of the sons of Israel on the two stones the way a gem cutter engraves a seal. Then mount the stones in gold filigree settings and fasten them on the shoulder pieces of the ephod as memorial stones for the sons of Israel. Aaron is to bear the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the LORD." (Exodus 28:9-12)

"Then mount four rows of precious stones on it. In the first row there shall be a ruby, a topaz and a beryl; in the second row a turquoise, a sapphire and an emerald; in the third row a jacinth, an agate and an amethyst; in the fourth row a chrysolite, an onyx and a jasper. Mount them in gold filigree settings. There are to be twelve stones, one for each of the names of the sons of Israel, each engraved like a seal with the name of one of the twelve tribes." (Exodus 28:17-21)

Each time the High Priest went into the presence of God he would carry the people of Israel with him indicating that he was there on their behalf.

4. They needed to be set apart for this task.

"After you put these clothes on your brother Aaron and his sons, anoint and ordain them. Consecrate them so they may serve me as priests." (Exodus 28:41)

Oil was used to commission someone to fulfil a special function.

"He poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him to consecrate him. Then he brought Aaron's sons forward, put tunics on them, tied sashes around them and put headbands on them, as the LORD commanded Moses." (Leviticus 8:12-13)

The priests were commissioned to hear God's voice, do God's work, and work in God's way.

"He then presented the other ram, the ram for the ordination, and Aaron and his sons laid their hands on its head. Moses slaughtered the ram and took some its blood and put it on the lobe of Aaron's right ear, on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot. Moses also

brought Aaron's sons forward and put some of the blood on the lobes of their right ears, on the thumbs of their right hands and on the big toes of their right feet." (Leviticus 8:22-24)

C. What does a priest do?

1. A general description of what a priest does is found in the book of Hebrews.

"Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. No-one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was." (Hebrews 5:1-4)

The priests as mediators, interceded for the people of Israel. How did they do this?

2. They represented God's people by offering sacrifices and praying prayers for them.

The priests offered sacrifices to God for the people, and there were two main types of sacrifices they offered – sin offerings and thank offerings.

The first kind of sacrifices (burnt, sin, guilt) are specifically said to make atonement. These sacrifices dealt with the people's sin to restore their relationship with God and make them acceptable to Him.

The other kind of sacrifice (grain) was the way the people of Israel said thank you to God. It represented a life that was pure and pleasing to God (a genuine thank offering).

"Aaron then brought the offering that was for the people. He took the goat for the people's sin offering and slaughtered it and offered it for a sin offering as he did with the first one. He brought the burnt offering and offered it in the prescribed way. He also brought the grain offering, took a handful of it and burned it on the altar in addition to the morning's burnt offering." (Leviticus 9:15-17)

The priests also prayed prayers to God for the people.

"Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, "Where is their God?" (Joel 2:17)

Then having represented God's people by offering their sacrifices and prayers, they then represented God to the people by ministering to them.

3. They ministered to God's people by teaching God's Word to them and pronouncing God's blessing on them.

The priests were to teach people how to make distinctions. God's people needed to know how to distinguish in order to live differently in this world.

"Then the LORD said to Aaron... "You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses." (Leviticus 10:10-11)

The priests were also to pronounce God's blessing on the people by putting His Name on them which comes with the promise of His provision, pardon, and protection.

"Then Aaron lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them. And having sacrificed the sin offering, the burnt offering and the fellowship offering, he stepped down." (Leviticus 9:22)

"The LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, "This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face towards you and give you peace." So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." (Numbers 6:22-27)