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http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/236

THE CHURCH AND THE MEDIATION OF GRACE: A REFORMED
PERSPECTIVE ON ORDAINED MINISTRY AND
THE THREEFOLD OFFICE OF CHRIST

by

Michael J. Matossian, B.A., M.Div., M.Th.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

December 2012

ABSTRACT
THE CHURCH AND THE MEDIATION OF GRACE: A REFORMED
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Michael J. Matossian, B.A., M.Div., M.Th.

Marquette University, 2012

This dissertation explores the relationship between grace, the church, ordained church offices, and the threefold office of Christ (*munus triplex*). The goal is to discern, in what ways and in what senses, we can speak of the mediation of grace through the church while maintaining a Reformed theological commitment to the principle that Christ alone is Mediator. Chapter one seeks to establish that Reformed doctrine regards the church both as locus and instrument of grace including the fact that the ordained offices are instruments of grace. Chapter two offers a definition of the concept of mediator, introduces categories of mediation, defines the prophetic dimension of Christ's mediatorial work, and seeks to show how the pastoral office mediates the prophetic grace of Christ without impinging on the uniqueness of Christ's office and work. Chapter three addresses the priestly mediation of Christ as well as the relationship between pastoral office and Christ's priestly work. Chapter four is concerned to provide a Reformed approach to Christ's royal office and how it is made manifest in the church today through all three ordained offices in the Reformed tradition—pastors, elders, and deacons. The introduction and conclusion briefly introduce, and draw connections between, the body of the dissertation and the Presbyterian debate between the so-called two-office and three-office views of church office and also make some preliminary suggestions of the usefulness of the dissertation's concern for ecumenical dialogue between the Reformed and Roman Catholic churches. The overarching concern is to recover a Reformed understanding of the centrality of the church in God's plan of salvation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Michael J. Matossian, B.A., M.Div., M.Th.

The completion of this dissertation comes as a bittersweet experience. The morning after I completed my final chapter, I learned from my advisor, Dr. Ralph G. Del Colle, that he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Hardly five weeks later, he was gone. Hebrews 4 speaks of the Sabbath rest that yet remains for the people of God. It was apropos that Dr. Del Colle's last day on this earth was a Sunday, a day called by the church through the ages the Lord's Day and, in the Puritan tradition, the Christian Sabbath. As his eyes closed with the close of the Christian Sabbath, Dr. Del Colle entered into the eternal rest that remains for the people of God. Although he did not see the final form of this project, I want to acknowledge my sincere gratitude for his guidance, advice, and especially his encouragement throughout the process. Dr. Del Colle, you are sorely missed.

I would also like to express my indebtedness to and deep appreciation for Dr. Mickey L. Mattox who immediately stepped in and took up the role as my advisor. His feedback has been invaluable. Thank you, Dr. Mattox.

I am grateful to the entire Theology Department at Marquette University for a wonderful graduate experience. A special thanks to Ms. Gale Prusinski—without her expertise in all the administrative dimensions of the Department and the University, I would have been lost. Many thanks to the Interlibrary Loan Department of Raynor-Memorial Library for all the articles and books they arranged

to send me as circumstances necessitated that I complete my research and writing away from Milwaukee.

To the Session and Congregation of Emmanuel Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware—thank you for your faithful prayers and your willingness to give your pastor all those extra weeks of study leave each year to complete this dissertation. I am truly grateful.

To my good friend, now the Reverend Dr. Chris Ganski—thank you for the weekly “dissertation chats.” Every one of those telephone and video conversations was beneficial for clarifying developing thoughts and ideas. Thank you for your friendship and support.

Many thanks to my parents, the Reverend Joseph and Mrs. Suzie Matossian. Without the foundation in the Christian faith as well as in the use of the mind that they provided me in childhood, I could never have come close to reaching this point. Mom, all those nights of homework you supervised at the dining room table paid off! And, Dad, thank you for allowing me access to your library and inspiring me to read and reflect on the marvels of our Triune God.

Finally, I thank my wife, Judy. More than anyone else, she has stood with me, prayed for me, encouraged me, and prodded me especially on those days I thought I would never finish. Thank you, Sweetheart! You deserve a doctorate in surviving stress. Matthew, our dear son, you too deserve thanks for doing without Dad too often since he had so much work to do. By God’s grace, we’ll have more time together now.

I could never end acknowledgments without remembering above all my God and Savior, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Whatever good is in these pages is only because of his goodness in allowing it to be there. If I did not think my work was in some small way a service to him who loved us more than we will ever understand in spite of our wretchedness, I would never have undertaken it. And, if it were not for God's grace, I could never have completed it. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

For my wife, Judy:

By God's grace, the dissertation is done, Sweetheart!

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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, a fellow-minister shared a story with me about an aged pastor who had once been asked how long it took him to prepare the sermon he had delivered in the worship service that day. The elderly pastor immediately replied, “A lifetime!” Of course, he did not mean by the quip that he had actually spent his entire life preparing that particular sermon. Rather, he was drawing attention to the fact that, regardless of how many hours are put into preparing a given sermon, every sermon and every act of pastoral ministry draws upon a lifetime of training and preparation both formal and informal. God uses his servants as who they are to minister to his people and to lead them in ministry. Even as the ministry of any given pastor or other church officer draws upon a life of preparation, reflection upon and examination of the roots and foundations of one’s ministry are critical for setting a proper trajectory for ministry. Few would dispute the importance of extended contemplation on the nature and roots of ministry as a means to be better equipped and prepared to serve Christ. I offer the following as an examination and contemplation of the roots and foundation of ministry in the church from within a Reformed theological framework.

In the Reformed tradition, discussions of church polity and therefore forms of ministry began in the sixteenth century as part of the separation from Rome. These discussions prepared the ground for what would develop into a Presbyterian form of church government and understanding of ministry. Whether Calvin’s Geneva, Bucer’s Strasbourg, Knox’s Scotland, etc., the foundation was laid for forms of ecclesiastical ministry that would incorporate both clergy and laypersons. As a

matter of fact, the innovation of Reformed thought was not so much the plurality of ecclesiastical ministries (pastors, elders, and deacons)¹ as the attribution of the ministries of rule and mercy—mercy understood as assistance for the needy and suffering—to lay offices, the ruling elder and the deacon respectively. McKee argues that the root of this development was the protestant redefinition of “the idea of the holy” leading to the breakdown of the “sacred-profane dichotomy.”² The dismantling of the sacred-profane dichotomy led to the “idea that ecclesiastical ministries might include temporal functions such as the administration of money, charity. Put another way, a plurality of ministers became a matter of argument only when, because of the teaching on justification by faith alone, nonsacramental services or ‘temporal’ duties such as poor relief came to be regarded as properly ‘religious’ vocations.”³ Ministry to the poor was always an aspect of the church’s ministry. However, it had been subsumed under the sacramental ministry as a subset of that ministry. The shift in Reformed thought, based on the sanctity of non-sacramental ministry, meant that “the administration of charity is a ministry having

¹ In some cases, for example, in Geneva, the offices of the church were listed as four: pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons. The office of teacher was a recognized role for instructing in the Geneva Academy and included the authority to administer the sacraments. It was closely associated with the ministerial/pastoral office. In part, the teaching office was a result of the ongoing commitment to Christendom, the idea of a Christian society. This commitment blurred the distinction between church and society in general. The office of teacher continues today as a way to describe seminary professors who are ecclesiastically ordained to word-ministry but may not be engaged in a regular pastoral ministry in a congregation. Sometimes a congregation may also have a pastor and a teacher with the teacher devoting his energies to teaching within the congregation while the pastor preaches and attends to all other pastoral duties.

² Elsie Anne McKee, “The Offices of Elders and Deacons in the Classical Reformed Tradition,” *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), 344.

³ *Ibid.*, 344-5.

its own *raison d'être*.”⁴ This same line of thought applies to the ministry of rule and governance exercised by the lay office of elder.

According to McKee, the office of elder “is one of the most important and controversial aspects of the Calvinist Reformed doctrine of ministry.”⁵ In some Reformed contexts of the sixteenth century—primarily the German-speaking areas—it was assumed that rule and governance of morals were the responsibility of the civil magistrate not of a specific ecclesiastical office. In contrast, Calvin in Geneva insisted on an ecclesiastically based, lay office of rule with the right and authority for excommunication.⁶ This frequently put Calvin at odds with the magistrates of Geneva. Once again, McKee explains, “Protestant rulers who were happy to support the new theological reforms in the shape of Lutheran and Zwinglian ‘pastor and prince’ cooperation were much more resistant to the Calvinist demand for an independent church discipline.”⁷ In due course, Calvin won out and the principle became part of Reformed and Presbyterian polities that a lay office of rule, the elder, joined together with the clerical office of pastor in the governance of the church and participated in oversight of morals and disciplinary actions when needed. And, although the office of elder could include men who were civil magistrates, “Calvin insisted, however, that councilors joined with ministers in this

⁴ Ibid., 345.

⁵ Ibid., 346.

⁶ Bucer, who influenced Calvin, sought similar authority for lay elders in Strasbourg. He was not, however, successful in fully instigating this change. See Amy Nelson Burnett, “Church Discipline and Moral Reformation in the Thought of Martin Bucer,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 22, no. 3 (1991): 438-56.

⁷ McKee, “The Offices of Elders and Deacons,” 346.

way must leave their batons outside the door where the Consistory met, for they could not exercise their civil authority in the public affairs of the Church.”⁸

Although the Reformed understanding of deacons and elders was innovative for its day, the Reformed believed they were recovering forms and practices of the early church that had been lost during the Middle Ages. With respect to the lay office of elder, Calvin, for example, wrote:

Governors [I Cor. 12:28] were, I believe, elders chosen from the people, who were charged with the censure of morals and the exercise of discipline along with the bishops. For one cannot otherwise interpret his statement, “Let him who rules act with diligence” [Rom. 12:8, cf. Vg.]. Each church, therefore, had from its beginning a senate, chosen from godly, grave, and holy men, which had jurisdiction over the correcting of faults. Of it we shall speak later. Now experience itself makes clear that this sort of order was not confined to one age. Therefore, this office of government is necessary for all ages.⁹

Notice Calvin’s insistence both on the biblical foundation for church rule with his reference to Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 and that each church “had *from its beginning* a senate” (emphasis mine). Behind Calvin’s assertion lies a conviction shared by many of the 16th century reformers that *seniores* or *gerontes*, referenced by Cyprian and others in relation to the church in North Africa, were “elders” associated with bishops and charged with oversight of the morals of the people. T. F. Torrance explains, “In their conviction that laymen, that is, people not ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, should have part in the government of the

⁸ T. F. Torrance, “The Eldership in the Reformed Church,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37, no 4 (1984): 505.

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics XXI, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2:1061, bk. 4.3.8. Also see, for example, Calvin’s *Reply to Sadoleto (1539)* [John Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, Library of Christian Classics, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954)] for the argument that the Reformers were seeking to restore what had been lost rather than creating something entirely new.

Church, so far as moral and judicial questions were concerned, the Reformers of Geneva introduced the *seniores laici* of North Africa into local Church jurisdiction.”¹⁰ As Torrance demonstrates and Kearsley reiterates, these *seniores* “were civil functionaries helping to maintain public and moral order” who, with the Christianization of North Africa, became associated with the clergy.¹¹ Assuming Torrance and Kearsley are correct, part of the historical foundation for the Reformed office of elder was laid on shaky ground. The historical data provided an impetus to consider the need for an office of oversight even if, arguably, the data was misinterpreted. Kearsley argues: “Geneva’s church order is not due so much to the New Testament, as to the need of the church for a body concerned with discipline, sanctification, community spirit and responsibility.”¹² The Reformers, on some level, were concerned with necessary functions or ministries more than with specific offices.

Of course, neither Calvin nor the other Reformed reformers would rest satisfied to base an office in the church on historical precedent. The office had to have clear biblical grounds. This was thought to be clear enough in the 1 Corinthians and Romans passages referenced above (p. 4). To these two, Calvin added 1 Timothy 5:17 which was understood as stipulating a distinction between a ruling function and a preaching/teaching function. The ruling function in 1 Timothy 5:17 was associated with a subset of the *presbuteroi* (“presbyters”) mentioned in the

¹⁰ T. F. Torrance, “The Eldership in the Reformed Church,” 504-5.

¹¹ Roy Kearsley, “Calvin and the Power of the Elder: A Case of the Rogue Hermeneutic?” *Interpreting the Bible: Historical and Theological Studies in Honour of David F. Wright*, ed. A. N. S. Lane (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1997), 122.

¹² *Ibid.*, 123.

passage. This laid the groundwork for the development over time of a full-orbed understanding of a lay office of elder focused on rule, governance, and discipline distinguished from a clerical office tasked with preaching and the administration of sacraments.¹³ Even though, in his commentary on 1 Timothy 5:17, Calvin applies the title presbyter to the lay elder, Kearsley reminds us “they [the elders] were not ordained in Geneva nor admitted to the Venerable Company of Pastors, which Torrance describes as a presbytery.”¹⁴ In other words, even though the ministry of elders overlapped with pastors, a clear distinction was maintained.

Ideologically, if not historically, a case can be made that the attribution of two church offices to the laity was, at least in part, an outflow of the Reformation understanding of the “priesthood of all believers.” In other words, the idea that every Christian had immediate access to God and the things of God without an additional intermediary besides Jesus Christ promoted a kind of egalitarian development leading to the leveling of hierarchical distinctions in the church and the elevation of the place of the laity. In practice, it has also led in some cases to extreme forms of individualism and overemphasis on both the right and the authority of each Christian to determine doctrine for himself. The right of individual conscience is part and parcel of the Reformation and Reformed thought especially because each individual is understood to be responsible to give an account of herself

¹³ There is an exegetical history behind Calvin’s interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:17, as well as general agreement among scholars that his ecclesiology was influenced by the senior Reformer, Martin Bucer. See, for example, Elsie Anne McKee, “Calvin’s Teaching on the Elder Illuminated by Exegetical History,” *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 147-55.

¹⁴ Kearsley, “Calvin and the Power of the Elder,” 123.

before the Lord. However, as will become clear in the chapters to follow, Reformed thought never elevated the individual as individual to stand apart from or against the church as a body nor against legitimately constituted church offices. Whether clergy or laity, according to Reformation thought, there was to be an expectation of solidarity, working together, and general agreement about faith and morals as well as a mutual subjection in both beliefs and Christian living.

There are a great many blessings in recovering the dignity and ministerial—ministerial understood as service—role of all believers. Even if God chooses to use ordained clergy or ordained laity for the administration of his grace to his people, the object is the glory of God and the blessing of the people. Church officers of every form are set in place for the benefit of the church body as a whole and each believer as an individual. Whether we emphasize the priesthood of all believers or their royal estate as joint-heirs with Christ, we are insisting that every believer is given an incredible privilege. As the Apostle John put it in his first epistle, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.”¹⁵ Male, female, clergy, lay, all are given the immense honor of being the children of God through Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, this elevation of the status of the laity in the Reformation era became part of a trajectory that has led, especially in the North American context, to the denigration of the church as authority in the life of believers and the denigration of church office. Sam Hamstra, in the introduction to his dissertation on the life and thought of John Williamson Nevin, writes anecdotally:

¹⁵ 1 John 3:1 (ESV).

It took less than a year before my idealistic, though naïve understanding of the Reformation doctrine of the office of pastoral ministry conflicted with reality, that is, my congregation's understanding of that same office. Two questions confronted me during my first pastorate. First, does the congregation need me? My predecessor had been released by the congregation. I sensed that the congregation viewed the pastor as a financial liability and a threat to the status quo. The pastoral office was not viewed as a necessary position in God's economy of redemption. Most believed that they could experience God's grace in a sufficient manner outside of the regular ministry of the church. They did not need the pastoral office and its ministry; they had the para-church.

Second, does the office of the ministry of the Word and sacraments have a *unique* sphere of authority that can be exercised by the office holder, i.e., pastor? Or is the authority of the office *common* to all Christians? My seminary training had led me to believe the former. I was taught that the pastoral office was necessary in the economy of redemption and that the pastor had authority to study, interpret and proclaim the Scriptures to his congregation. In addition, I learned that this proclamation was in some mysterious way the very Word of God to His people. I never understood how that could be but I quickly learned that it did not make any difference. My congregation did not grant such authority to its pastor. It believed that the authority to study, interpret, and teach Scriptures was common to all Christians. In other words, it assumed the right of private judgment. This conviction was defended by generic references to the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. In the end this meant that the sermon was a topic for opinionated discussion over a cup of coffee immediately after a service. It was something over which Christians could debate and even disagree.¹⁶

My own pastoral experience, especially in my first call, was very similar to Hamstra's. What we have experienced, however, is part of an historical trend. D. G. Hart, describing a commonality between those on opposite sides of the debate about the ordination of women to church office, writes, "Despite these differences, both sides have one thing in common, namely, silence about the nature and scope of the

¹⁶ Sam Hamstra, Jr., "John Williamson Nevin: The Christian Ministry" (Ph.D. Diss., Marquette University, 1990), 1-2.

authority that the office of pastor or elder constitutes.”¹⁷ Hart traces the roots of this present day silence to the evangelicalism that arose out of the revivals of the eighteenth century and the influence they had on the nature and expectations of leadership among Christians. He explains:

These revivals were important because they forged a new style of religious leadership, one that was direct, personal, popular, and depended much more on the speaker’s appeal to the audience—his charisma—than on his standing in the social hierarchy. Theology and formal learning were not important to the revivalists’ appeal. Instead, personality, style, and emotion were better indicators of ability.¹⁸

When a shift of this nature takes place, it impacts not only views and perspectives on church offices, authority, and government. It impacts the understanding of the nature of the grace that God is giving his people. Grace comes to be viewed as a reality to be experienced through emotions rather than the application of God’s transforming power to all of life. In a manner of speaking, grace becomes that which is found inside rather than that which comes from without. The temptation becomes to look into oneself, to find that trigger for an emotional high, rather than to embrace what God objectively offers and gives.

In his award-winning book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Nathan O. Hatch traces in great detail the growth of populist sentiment in American Christianity and how, in many ways, it makes the “audience” the authority.¹⁹ If the audience, meaning the body of Christians as a whole and, often, as individuals, exercises sovereign power, how will benefit come from structures of church polity

¹⁷ D. G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁹ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989). See especially chapters 5 and 6.

and office that the church is persuaded are given by God? In other words, if God has determined to minister his grace to his people through church offices but his people refuse to accept that reality, will they not miss the blessing?

A democratization and republican sentiment is also evident in debates over the nature of offices in Reformed and Presbyterian polity. In the nineteenth century, controversy erupted over the relationship between pastors and elders. As high a view of pastoral office as Calvin, Bucer, and others in the sixteenth century held, the attribution of the term presbyter to the lay office of elder opened the door to future conflict. That conflict became reality in the nineteenth century both among Scottish Presbyterians and American Presbyterians.²⁰ In the American context the issue focused on two questions: 1) Given their membership and participation in the presbytery, should ruling elders be permitted to lay hands on an ordinand at the ordination of a pastor? 2) Must the quorum for a presbytery to conduct business mandate the presence of ruling elders?

The name Presbyterian derives from the Greek word *presbuteros* which is generally translated into English as “elder.” More broadly, the term means an old or older man. Part of the contention on the one side of the controversy in the nineteenth century was that the use of *presbuteros* in the New Testament, for the most part, is restricted to those we call pastors, ministers, bishops—that is to say, those who are called to minister the word and sacraments. Among Presbyterians, the term elder is used, however, of those who are appointed to rule and govern in

²⁰ See Iain Murray, “Ruling Elders—A Sketch of a Controversy,” *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*, ed. Mark R. Brown (Duncansville, Pa.: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993), 157-68.

the church in conjunction with ministers—sometimes called *ruling* elders. Confusion arises because the term elder is applied to both categories of church officers, pastors and ruling elders. This is especially evident in the present day in the church orders of the Presbyterian Church in America and the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. both of which use the expression “teaching elder” as an alternative for pastor or minister. Furthermore, Presbyterian polity calls for governing councils in a region—the Presbyterian equivalent of a “diocese”—known as presbyteries. When a presbytery meets, it is generally composed of all the ministers in a region along with a ruling elder representative from each congregation in that region. In common Presbyterian parlance, those who officially attend these meetings are called “presbyters.” Thus, the term is applied generically both to ministers and ruling elders since both sets of officers are present in such meetings. It is easy to see how these two classes of church officer can begin to become confused with one another and indistinguishable unless great care is taken to bear in mind that they are two different offices, one clerical the other lay. And, it must be borne in mind that each office received the name elder on an entirely different basis, the one in fulfillment of the New Testament *presbuteros / episkopos*, the other as analogous to the elders of the people in the Old Testament.

For the nineteenth century debates, the real issue was between those who, on the one side, urged the participation of elders in ministers’ ordinations arguing that there are two orders (elders and deacons) in the ministry as opposed to those on the other side who believed there to be three orders (ministers, elders, deacons). Within the order of elder, the two-office view argued, “there are two classes

invested with different offices, though belonging to the same order.”²¹ In other words, ministers and elders have the same rank and status in the church and therefore hold the same ordination. Hence, the two-order group wished to dispense with the church constitution’s insistence that there are two different ordinations, one for ministers and one for elders. In opposition to this, the three-office proponents insisted that the ordination for each office—pastor, elder, deacon—is different and therefore each must be regarded as a distinct office and separate order.

In my conclusion, I return to suggest a way in which my work on the relationship between the threefold office of Christ and office in the church provides a solution or, at least, an alternative way to approach the question of office and ministry than the approach of the two-office / three-office debate. Regardless of which side one comes down on of this in-house Presbyterian debate, a shared concern is the centrality of the church in God’s plan of salvation. Inseparable from this concern is the understanding that God ministers his grace to his people through the church.

Before discussing the senses in which God ministers to us through his chosen instrument, having an understanding of grace is necessary. For this reason, I begin in chapter one by providing a working definition of grace in Reformed thought. Then, I turn my attention to the senses in which God mediates his grace through the church and, especially, through the ordained church offices. An important point that

²¹ Charles Hodge, “Rights of Ruling Elders,” *Discussions in Church Polity*, ed. William Durant (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878), 271. *Discussions in Church Polity* is a collection of Hodge’s writings on ecclesiology in the nineteenth century.

I make in that chapter is that Christ himself continues to minister to his people. Therefore, all ministry in the church is the ministry of Christ. Furthermore, I argue that he continues to minister out of his threefold office as Prophet, Priest, and King and, therefore, ordained office in the church must have a connection to the *munus triplex*. In chapters three through five, I seek to present a Reformed understanding of the mediatorial work of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King and then to show the ways in which that work is made manifest in the church through ordained office. As will become evident, I see a connection between all three offices (Prophet, Priest, King) and the pastoral office in the church while the offices of elder and deacon I argue manifest especially Christ's royal office.

In recent years, both in the broader Protestant world and among the Reformed, there has been a growing interest in ecclesiology and the place of the church in God's plan of salvation. Donald Bloesch, for example, devotes a chapter to the church's place in God's plan of salvation in his text *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*. Unfortunately, although giving a helpful overview of the views of Luther, Calvin, Brunner, Barth, and T. F. Torrance, the chapter is brief and only suggestive rather than a full-orbed argument in favor of ecclesial mediation. John Yocum traces Karl Barth's understanding of ecclesial mediation in *Ecclesial Mediation in Karl Barth*, in which he argues that dialogue with and critique of Barth "affords a point of access for considering the rationale for a sacramental view of the Church and the relation of God to human beings." Similarly, Gary Badcock, drawing on a variety of sources including Barth, argues for a sacramental view of the Church from a Reformed perspective in his article "The Church as 'Sacrament'" in *The*

Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology. These authors, using sacramental language, indicate the centrality of the church in God's plan of salvation and, thus, give it some kind of mediating role with respect to grace. Badcock, for example, makes the point that "faith does not happen in a vacuum, but springs to life in specifically *ecclesial* contexts." The use of sacramental language highlights this mediating service of the church. What sets my work apart from these is that I argue for ecclesial mediation not in sacramental terms but from the definition of the church in relation to Christ's *munus triplex* and his exercise of the *triplex* through ordained offices of the church.

Two major works in Reformed ecclesiology of recent date are Edmund Clowney's *The Church* in the IVP Contours of Christian Theology series and Michael S. Horton's fourth volume of his systematic theology called *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology*. Clowney, in his chapter on the structure of the church, describes the means of ministry entrusted to the church as threefold: ministry of the word, ministry of mercy, and ministry of order. He then writes of the "general" office held by all believers and thereby their participation in these ministries. Following the general office is "special" office which brings into view the ordained offices of pastor, elder, and deacon and the fact they also participate in the three means of ministry. Clowney does argue that Christ's mediatorial office undergirds all three forms but he does not elaborate on the details. In another of his works, "A Brief for Church Governors,"²² he draws some connection between the threefold

²² Edmund P. Clowney, "A Brief for Church Governors," *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*, ed. Mark R. Brown (Duncansville, Pa.: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993), 43-65.

office of Christ and church office arguing, however, that the community now exercises the offices. The priestly office he appears to see continued only in the priesthood of all believers while he sees more of a connection between the royal and prophetic offices and ordained offices in the church. He is hesitant, however, to make a strong connection between the threefold office of Christ and church office. Building on Clowney's work but differing from him, I argue for a direct connection between Christ's threefold office and office in the church.

Horton's objective in *People and Place* is to offer an alternative to, on the one hand, those ecclesiologies that "conflate head and members in a single subject: the whole Christ (*totus Christus*)" and, on the other, those that sharply distinguish between the invisible, true Church, and the visible "even to the point of setting them in opposition." Horton gives an important place to an ecclesial mediation of grace. Working with his concept of covenant, he seeks to understand the "connection between union with Christ (soteriology) and the communion of the saints (ecclesiology)."²³ Philip W. Butin's short work, *Reformed Ecclesiology: Trinitarian Grace According to Calvin* makes a connection between grace, the church, and Christ's threefold office. Although this is related to my own concerns in the present project, Butin's focus is on Trinitarian dimensions of grace while mine is more specifically on the Christological dimensions of grace.

While there is a clear connection and some overlap between my project and the aforementioned works, my focus on the way grace is mediated through the formal offices and structures of the church distinguishes my project. All of the

²³ Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), ix.

foregoing works provide arguments for the centrality of the church in God's plan of salvation but do not give a great deal of attention to the role of ordained office within that plan. Butin, whose work perhaps comes closest to my own, still differs from me because he focuses on the Trinitarian nature of grace, while I seek to focus on grace from the Christological angle. Butin's work does treat the threefold office of Christ in one section. However, he focuses attention more on believers in general than on the ordained (though he makes some reference to the latter).

In associating grace with the threefold office of Christ, the work of Robert Sherman is significant. In *King, Priest, Prophet*, Sherman articulates, through the threefold office, a theology of atonement and grounds it in Trinitarian fashion. That is, he connects each office (King, Priest, Prophet) with a person of the Trinity (King with the Father, Priest with the Son, and Prophet with the Holy Spirit). Horton also relates the threefold office to atonement questions in *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology*. My project, though connected with both Sherman's and Horton's, is distinct because I will articulate a Reformed theology of grace rather than of atonement—although grace and atonement are inseparable. Calvin's work in the *Institutes* (2.15) lays the groundwork for all subsequent Reformed thought about the threefold office and must be accounted for. R. B. Kuiper, in *The Glorious Body of Christ*—written for a popular audience—makes a direct link between Reformed church offices and Christ's threefold office arguing that the prophetic office is connected to pastors, the royal to ruling elders, and the priestly to deacons. I argue that Kuiper's connections are incorrect and that all three offices are found in the pastoral office in full while the office of ruling elder and of deacon primarily fall

under Christ's royal office. The work of A. Craig Troxel must also be noted. Troxel, in his Ph.D. dissertation, "Divine Right' Presbyterianism and Church Power," demonstrates that 19th-century Presbyterian theologians used the threefold office to describe Christ's headship over the church, which headship is the source of church authority/power. Nevertheless, they were reluctant to allow that the church on earth exercises any of the offices of Christ. The offices are his uniquely and he himself, through his Spirit, exercises them toward his people. While maintaining the objective and unique fulfillment of the threefold office by Christ and the central role of the Spirit, I argue that it is consistent with Reformed doctrine to see Christ's ongoing exercise of the threefold office to be operative through the structures of the Church.

Finally, in the conclusion, I return not only to suggest ways in which my work contributes to the in-house Reformed discussion of office but to suggest ways it might aid in Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue. Important in this respect is the document that came out of the second phase (1984-1990) of the Reformed-Roman Catholic international dialogue entitled "Towards a Common Understanding of the Church." I make some preliminary and suggestive connections between my work and issues raised in that document.

CHAPTER 1

THE CHURCH AND THE MEDIATION OF GRACE

Grace in Reformed Thought: An Abbreviated Introduction

Given that one of the major concerns of the Protestant Reformation was salvation by grace—captured in the expression *sola gratia*, a phrase meant to emphasize by shorthand that we are redeemed only by God’s grace in Christ apart from any works we do—it is interesting that none of the sixteenth-century Reformers produced a volume dedicated specifically to the topic of grace in itself. Richard A. Muller writes, “Although the Reformers held firmly to a doctrine of salvation by grace alone, virtually none of them wrote a separate treatise on grace—nor, indeed, is there a *locus* on grace in Musculus, Calvin, or Vermigli.”¹ Certainly, the major Reformers were interested in the nature and concept of grace but not as a standalone topic. For this reason, if we were to seek one locus within Reformed doctrine where grace is most clearly identified and discussed, it would be Reformed soteriology and the so-called *ordo salutis*—the order of the application of salvation. In Reformed thought, grace is, as Calvin puts it, the “undeserved goodness of God.”² This undeserved goodness is most particularly seen in God’s gift of salvation summarized in the *ordo*: effectual calling, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, preservation, glorification. This does not mean there

¹ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), 3:569.

² Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, Calvin’s Commentaries (n.d., repr., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), 7:453.

has never been interest in grace as a broader category beyond redemption. For example, as can be seen in the context of Calvin's definition of grace as the undeserved goodness of God, he speaks of "anything good which we have" as having proceeded from this undeserved goodness.³ Thus, even though grace in Reformed thought is redemptive in focus, it does have a broader sense to it as well—all of God's gifts to us are from his grace. This highlights a key aspect of a Reformed approach to grace: its true graciousness or "freeness." In other words, grace is truly grace: something neither earned nor deserved but freely and willingly bestowed by God upon his creatures.

Grace and the Ordo Salutis

The *ordo salutis* is the order of the application of the benefits of Christ's work. Summarizing the thought of covenant theologians, Murray explains, "The covenant is that by which God reconciles us to himself in Christ and bestows upon us the twofold benefit of gratuitous righteousness in the remission of sins and renovation after God's image."⁴ Grace is both a constitutive reality as well as a transformative reality that is given by God on account of the work of Christ. It has constitutive elements such as justification and adoption and it has transformative elements such

³ Ibid., 453.

⁴ Murray, "Covenant Theology," 225. For further discussion of the twofold benefit of the covenant of grace, see R. Scott Clark on Olevianus, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant: The Double Benefit of Christ*, Reformed Historical-Theological Studies, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Jay T. Collier (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005); Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The "Twofold Grace of God" and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology*, Reformed Historical Theology, vol. 2, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007).

as regeneration and sanctification. The core elements of the *ordo salutis* include “justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them.”⁵ The additional benefits that accompany or flow from these three include “assurance of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end.”⁶ But, the benefits of Christ’s work extend beyond this life to the resurrection and include perfection in holiness and the beatific vision:

Q. 90. What shall be done to the righteous at the day of judgment?

A. At the day of judgment, the righteous, being caught up to Christ in the clouds, shall be set on his right hand, and there openly acknowledged and acquitted, shall join with him in the judging of reprobate angels and men, and shall be received into heaven, where they shall be fully and forever freed from all sin and misery; filled with inconceivable joys, made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul, in the company of innumerable saints and holy angels, but especially in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity. And this is the perfect and full communion which the members of the invisible church shall enjoy with Christ in glory, at the resurrection and day of judgment.

The *ordo salutis* describes the breadth and depth of the gifts of God in redemption. Its ordering is meant to show a logical progression from the first to the last element, from effectual calling to glorification. The approach to soteriology represented by the *ordo salutis* is not held without dissent in Reformed circles.⁷ However, the details outlined in the *ordo* are accepted by the majority if not all Reformed as a description of the details of the benefits that accrue to believers in their union with Christ. In other words, even where there is disagreement over the idea of

⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 32 in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, U.K.: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

⁶ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 36.

⁷ For a brief discussion of the differences of opinion including his own approach, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 11-17.

progression, ordering, or logical interconnection, the elements of the *ordo* are accepted as descriptions of aspects of salvation. For the purposes of explaining grace in Reformed thought, I do not intend to give a comprehensive explanation of the *ordo salutis* but to highlight three dimensions I believe are helpful for defining and understanding grace.

First, the elements of the *ordo salutis* answer to the needs of the fallen human condition. For example, effectual calling, which “is the work of God’s almighty power and grace,”⁸ is the phrase describing God’s work of drawing to himself the unbeliever who is understood to be dead in sin and therefore unable in any sense to come to God of his own volition. Thus, effectual calling is associated with regeneration in which the one spiritually dead in sin is made alive with respect to God. Similarly, justification is understood as an act of God’s grace whereby the sinner is pardoned and accounted as righteous because of the work of Christ. This answers to the state of the sinner as one of unrighteousness and guilt, of legal liability and condemnation. In justification, the guilt is removed, the sinner acquitted and considered to be in good standing, so to speak, with the law. Sanctification answers to the reality that God, even when he effectually calls and regenerates, does not immediately perfect the individual. Rather, there are remnants of sin—often called “indwelling sin”—that require mortification and transformation. This is the work of sanctification whereby believers “having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more

⁸ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 67 in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, U.K.: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.”⁹ As rebellious creatures tossed out of the garden because of Adam’s sin, humans lost their status as the honored children of God. Hence, in adoption, orphaned and alienated children are taken in by God to be his children and “fellow-heirs with Christ in glory.”¹⁰

As each of these aspects of the *ordo salutis* address the fallen human condition, they are dimensions of God’s grace because, undeserved as they are, God yet grants them and effects these redemptive ends. Each part of the comprehensive gift of the *ordo* stems from God’s grace. So, for example, justification and adoption are both described in the Westminster Larger Catechism as an act of grace on God’s part.¹¹ Other elements of the *ordo* including repentance and faith are described as “saving graces.”¹² The main point of all of this is to say that grace, in Reformed thought, is the fullness of redemption for the individual characterized by the components of the *ordo salutis*.

Second, the description of the *ordo salutis* found in the Westminster documents highlights an important distinction for understanding grace, namely, there are two operative forms of grace: acts and works. For example, in Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 70 justification is described as “an act of God’s free grace unto sinners” while in Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 75 sanctification is described as a “work of God’s grace.” Some aspects of God’s gift of redemption are punctiliar actions. When God justifies a sinner, he makes a declaration and constitutes the sinner as righteous in his sight. This is not a work that requires

⁹ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 75.

¹⁰ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 74.

¹¹ Westminster Larger Catechism Q.’s 70 and 74.

¹² Westminster Larger Catechism Q.’s 72 and 76.

prolonged action over time. Adoption, too, is understood as a “one-time” action. Once adopted, there is nothing more to do to be adopted. It’s a done deal. In contrast to both justification and adoption, sanctification is understood as a work that is spread out over the lifetime of the believer. God does not immediately perfect but works through the years to bring the life of the individual more and more into conformity with his standards of righteousness. Thus, grace is understood as two-fold: it grants changed status through the acts of justification and adoption and a changing nature through the work of sanctification. Grace is both a constitutive reality and a transforming power.

Third, the *ordo salutis* connects the work of Christ as Mediator—that is to say in his threefold office—and the redemption of the individual. All three of the Westminster Assembly documents, the Confession of Faith and both catechisms, describe the Mediator and his work before proceeding to a discussion of the benefits accruing to believers because of the Mediator. So, for example, the Westminster Larger Catechism addresses the Mediator, his offices, and work in questions 36 – 57 and then turns to the application of the benefits of the Mediator from 57 – 90. The Westminster Confession of Faith and Westminster Shorter Catechism as well as the Heidelberg Catechism follow a similar progression as also the Belgic Confession. In other words, Christ as Mediator in his threefold office provides all the benefits enumerated in the *ordo salutis*. Thus, the *ordo* also provides reason to view grace within the framework of the threefold office of Christ.

A Working Definition of Grace

How might we summarize grace in Reformed thought? Grace is God's favorable disposition toward those of his choosing by which he freely grants them both right standing before him and a changing character progressing in holiness so that they are more and more conformed to his will. This constitutive and transforming grace is the reality God ordinarily mediates to individuals through the church. In the remainder of this chapter, I will flesh out more fully how this mediation of grace is part-and-parcel of a Reformed definition and understanding of the church.

The Church and the Mediation of Grace

I now turn my attention to the place or locus of grace—the church—seeking to answer the question: Where is grace found and appropriated? Another way of putting the question is: Is the principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* valid and, if so, in what sense? What I hope to show is that Reformed thought historically has believed that the church is central to God's plan of salvation yet this centrality does not detract from God's power and freedom to act "without, above, and against" his ordinary means.¹³ Furthermore, I will argue that the centrality of the church to

¹³ This phrase, "without, above, and against" is taken from the Westminster Confession of Faith 5.3. Chapter five of the Confession addresses the doctrine of God's providence. The point being made in paragraph three is that God is free to work through ordinary means but at the same time "without, above, and against them." The full paragraph reads, "God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure." Applying this thought to the doctrine of the church, the point is that even if God

God's plan should be subsumed under the headship of Christ over the church. This headship is expressed through his threefold office which he continues to exercise in his estate of exaltation. When the further question is posed, where and how do we see Christ exercising this headship today, the answer, I will argue, is the ordained ministries or offices of the church.

The structure of this chapter will be as follows: The first section will highlight the tension in Reformed thought in which God chooses ordinarily to use his church for his redemptive ends but that the power remains in the Spirit not in the church. In other words, the sense that there is a "direct" line from God to individuals is held in tension with the idea that God uses human means, i.e., the church, to bring his grace to people. The second section will show that the usual definitions and descriptions of the church found in Reformed sources demonstrate that the church is the locus of grace. The third section will seek to show that the church is not only the locus or theater of grace, as Horton puts it, but is the instrument God uses to bring his grace to bear on individuals.

The Tension in Reformed Thought

In what is one of the most majestically written chapters of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Westminster Assembly makes the following assertion:

The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly

ordinarily uses the ministry of the Church to accomplish his ongoing redemptive ends, he is free to accomplish those ends by other means if he so chooses. This does not negate, however, that the ministry of his church is his usual instrument.

upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.¹⁴

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.¹⁵

Although the Divines later in the Confession will give the church an important place in God's plan of salvation, from the beginning of the Confession we already see an aversion to allowing any form of human agency to enter into the work of God. Caution is exercised to retain all transformative and authoritative power in God himself. The authority of Scripture comes not from any witness given to it by the church nor from the church's authority in determining the boundaries of the canon, but from God himself. Scripture is to be received "because it is the Word of God." Even the persuasion that the sixty-six canonical books of the Protestant canon are truly the word of God comes directly from God himself: "our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts." Notice how the Spirit is the illuminating and persuading agent *even when using his own word*. I believe this approach, though not without warrant, betrays a fear arising from the overemphasis on the church's authority found in the Middle Ages. The

¹⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.4 in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, U.K.: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

¹⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5.

Reformers and their immediate descendants, though they believed the church was God's chosen instrument to bring his salvific grace to mankind, yet wanted carefully to circumscribe that understanding with the idea that all real power was in God, not God's chosen instrument.

We also see this concern in their articulation of the principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*. In defining the visible church,¹⁶ the divines explain in Westminster Confession of Faith 25.2 that “out of which [the visible church] there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” To a degree, there is a hedging of bets—there can be scenarios in which God may bring his salvation to those outside the visible church but this is not the ordinary, usual way—the usual way being in and through the visible church. In commenting on the Westminster Confession's statement about there being “no ordinary possibility of salvation” outside the visible church, Jan Rohls explains, “God has in fact tied the mediation of salvation to the visible church, so that *normally* no one can be saved who does not belong to it. If someone who did not belong to the visible church were nevertheless to be saved, this would rest on God's *extraordinary* decision.”¹⁷ The fact, however, that the divines allow for salvation, rare as it might be, outside the church, once again demonstrates their concern to maintain all power—and all freedom of exercising that power—in God himself. Their definitions of the sacraments similarly emphasize the freedom of God to exercise his power:

¹⁶ The visible church is the observable body of believers on earth. The invisible includes the elect only as is visible to God alone. See below, pp. 38-43.

¹⁷ Emphasis original. Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 171.

The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.¹⁸

Once again, all efficacy associated even with divinely ordained means is found in God the Spirit not in the means themselves.

The same tension between the use of institutional means and God's direct activity in bringing his grace to us is found in the Second Helvetic Confession. In Chapter 17, "Of the Catholic and Holy Church of God, and of the One Only Head of the Church," the Confession states:

Outside the Church of God There Is No Salvation. But we esteem fellowship with the true Church of Christ so highly that we deny that those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true Church of God, but separate themselves from it. For as there was no salvation outside Noah's ark when the world perished in the flood; so we believe that there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church; and hence we teach that those who wish to live ought not to be separated from the true Church of Christ.

The Church Is Not Bound to Its Signs. Nevertheless, by the signs [of the true Church] mentioned above, we do not so narrowly restrict the Church as to teach that all those are outside the Church who either do not participate in the sacraments, at least not willingly and through contempt, but rather, being forced by necessity, unwillingly abstain from them or are deprived of them; or in whom faith sometimes fails, though it is not entirely extinguished and does not wholly cease; or in whom imperfections and errors due to weakness are found. For we know that God had some friends in the world outside the commonwealth of Israel. We know what befell the people of God in the captivity of Babylon, where they were deprived of their sacrifices for seventy years. We know what happened to St. Peter, who denied his Master, and what is wont to happen daily to God's elect and faithful people who go astray and are weak. We know, moreover, what kind of churches the churches in Galatia and Corinth were in the apostles' time, in which the apostle found fault with

¹⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith 27.3.

many serious offenses; yet he calls them holy churches of Christ (I Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:2).¹⁹

In the first of these two paragraphs, the Confession insists there is no salvation outside the church: “we deny those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true Church of God,” further adding that Christ “offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect *in the Church* [emphasis mine].” There appears to be no doubt that salvation is found in Christ and he is found only in the church. But, even after this strong statement, the Confession includes the phrase “there is no *certain* [emphasis mine] salvation outside Christ” who is offered to us in the church. Rather than a statement that leaves absolutely no possibility of salvation outside the church, the point made is that any salvation outside is *not certain*. It may exist out there but it’s not certain apart from Christ who is found inside the church.

Another way in which the perceived tension between Divine and human agency is addressed in Reformed thought is in answer to the question “whether the knowledge of the church ought to precede the knowledge of doctrine,” as Turretin put it.²⁰ Turretin reaches the conclusion that doctrine and faith precede the church. This conclusion, of course, begs the question: from where did that doctrine and faith come? Turretin himself recognizes the importance and role of the church in God’s plan of salvation since he agrees to a form of the tenet *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est* as he writes, “since there is no salvation out of the church...nothing ought to be

¹⁹ Second Helvetic Confession 17 in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 266.

²⁰ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1679), trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), 3:1, topic 18, quest. 1, sec. 1.

dearer to our hearts than that this mother may be known..."²¹ Nevertheless, at the same time, he argues for the priority of doctrine and faith. What does this entail?

Turretin begins his argument for the priority of doctrine and faith first by making a case for the necessity of discussing the church as a distinct locus. He provides four primary reasons which he breaks into two categories, three in the first, one in the second. The first category derives from the identity of the church considered "absolutely and in itself," while the second category—in which he only provides one reason—results from the need to address "our opponents."²²

Turretin's first reason for a distinct locus on ecclesiology—falling under the church considered in itself—is that "the church is the primary work of the holy Trinity, the object of Christ's mediation and the subject of the application of his benefits."²³ The church exists as church because God has wrought this work. Everything that Christ did in his mediatorial office, he did "for no other reason than to acquire a church for himself and call it (when acquired) into a participation of grace and glory."²⁴ Turretin's assertions here are indicative of the importance Reformed theology places upon the church. The church is that body which participates in the grace and glory of Christ. To the question "What special benefits do the members of the invisible church enjoy by Christ," the Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 65 gives the answer, "The members of the invisible church by Christ enjoy union and communion with him in grace and glory." To think of Christ's work, indeed of Christ himself, is to think of his church. In more recent times, John Murray

²¹ Ibid., 18.1.3 (3:1).

²² Turretin, *Institutes* 18.1.1 (3:1).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

put it this way, “But if we think of Christ apart from the church, then we are guilty of dismemberment that severs what God has joined together.”²⁵ Turretin continues, “Hence the offices and benefits of Christ having been explained, the order demands that we discuss the church, to which alone they are destined and come to be applied.”²⁶ Given that the church is the object of Christ’s mediating work, the church deserves to be discussed as a distinct locus. I will revisit the concept of the church as “object” of Christ’s mediating work in part two of this chapter since that is an aspect of the demonstration that the church is the locus or concrete place of grace.

Turretin’s second argument for the propriety of discussing the church as a distinct locus is that “there is no salvation out of the church.”²⁷ What this means for Turretin is that the church is God’s chosen instrument for growth and development in the faith. He speaks of God having willed that we are “to be educated and to be nourished” in the bosom of the church so that we are “directed by her care until we grow up and arrive at the goal of faith.”²⁸ Although more will be said in section three of this chapter about the church as instrument, I highlight Turretin’s comment at this point, once again, because it shows an apparent tension in Reformed thought between Divine and human work in salvation. Turretin is about to argue that faith and doctrine precede knowledge of the church. Yet, one of the reasons he gives for

²⁵ John Murray, “The Church: Its Identity, Functions, and Resources,” *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:238.

²⁶ Turretin, *Institutes* 18.1.3 (3:1).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Anyone familiar with Calvin’s work will recognize in Turretin clear echoes of Calvin’s statements about the church’s ministry in Book 4 of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in which he develops the mother metaphor. Calvin himself borrows the metaphor from Cyprian.

the importance of a separate locus on the doctrine of the church is that the church is the mother “in whose bosom God has willed us to be educated and to be nourished.” This work of the church indicates, however, that the church is where faith comes from. If that is the case, do faith and doctrine truly precede knowledge of the church or do they arise from the knowledge the church imparts?

Turretin’s third argument for discussing the church as a distinct topic is that “this doctrine is put among the primary articles of faith in the Creed (to the knowledge and belief of which we are bound).”²⁹ From where does the Creed come? Given that the Creed is not a divinely inspired document on par with Scripture, why would Turretin use it to argue for giving the church a separate locus in dogmatics? The Creed is a document produced and approved by the church even as it summarizes key elements of the faith all of which are derived from Scripture. Adherence to these doctrines is mandated because they summarize the gospel. But, to speak of being bound to the Creed and, on that basis, to argue for a locus on the church seems to me to be putting the church’s extra-Scriptural statement on par with Scripture implying thereby that the church is to be believed on its own merits like Scripture. Turretin himself does not draw this conclusion. He merely asserts the importance of a locus on the church because the church receives mention in the Creed. Once again, this is indicative of the tension in Reformed thought—what comes first, the church or individual faith?

Turretin’s fourth argument for the necessity of discussing the church derives not from the church considered in itself but from the battle with those who are in

²⁹ Turretin, *Institutes* 18.1.3 (3:1).

opposition. Turretin has the Roman Catholic Church and theologians primarily in mind although he alludes to heretics and others as well. He writes, “The arts of our opponents impose upon us the necessity of this disputation that we may distinguish the real face of the church from its counterfeit.”³⁰ Dealing with the opponents is important for identifying that which is truly the church. As Turretin noted earlier, “Also it behooves us to know what assembly is that true church with which (according to the command of God) we are bound to connect ourselves that we may obtain salvation (Acts 2:47).”³¹ I will return to the Reformed understanding of the marks of the true church below. What is important to note here is the central place Turretin accords the church in salvation—we are bound to connect ourselves to it “that we may obtain salvation.” It would seem, if that is the case, the church—a divinely appointed yet human body—has a role in the salvation of individual believers. But, as we will see, Turretin desires to place doctrine and faith ahead of the church in matters of salvation.

Having argued his case for a separate locus on the church, Turretin turns his attention to the question whether doctrine and faith precede knowing the church or are known *from* the church. Not surprisingly, Turretin argues for the priority of doctrine and faith: “Now although the knowledge of the church is especially necessary to us, still it must not be supposed that it ought to precede the examination and knowledge of doctrine, so that faith or doctrine ought to be known from the church rather than the church from doctrine and faith.”³² In making this

³⁰ Turretin, *Institutes* 18.1.6 (3:2).

³¹ Turretin, *Institutes* 18.1.3 (3:1).

³² Turretin, *Institutes* 18.1.7 (3:3).

assertion, Turretin is targeting his Roman Catholic contemporaries who argue “that faith ought to be known from the church, rather than the church from faith; and that we can be secure concerning faith provided we are in the church.”³³ The issue at stake is whether doctrine, and faith in that doctrine, ground the institution of the church or the institution of the church grounds doctrine and faith. Turretin argues that the church does not and cannot exist before faith and doctrine. In the end, however, the dispute between Turretin and his Catholic contemporaries is over the authority of the church: is the true church known by the assertion of authority, i.e., do we simply accept that the Catholic Church is The Church on the basis of its extant authority—an approach Turretin regards as “blind obedience”—or do we follow “the way of discussion and examination of doctrine”?

Turretin makes a number of arguments in favor of “discussion of doctrine.” First, he argues that Scripture itself “is wont to premise the examination of faith and doctrine to the knowledge and communion of the church.”³⁴ He points out that Christ, in sending the Apostles to gather the church presupposes that instruction and knowledge precede membership in the church. Turretin highlights Matt. 28:19 and understands Christ’s charge to the Apostles to make disciples as beginning with teaching before administering baptism which, for Turretin, marks entrance into the church. He also directs attention to Acts 2:41 indicating that those who were added to the church were first taught by the Apostles just as also the Samaritans in Acts 8:12 believed and then were baptized. The grounding for Turretin’s argument is the circumstances of the baptism of an adult. Just as faith must precede baptism of an

³³ Ibid., 18.1.7 (3:3).

³⁴ Ibid., 18.1.8, (3:3).

adult, “so examination of faith and knowledge ought to precede knowledge of the church.”³⁵ The difficulty is that the knowledge of faith, what is to be believed, is *proclaimed and taught* by representatives of the church—a fact with which Turretin would agree. Once again, there is an apparent tension between God’s direct work giving faith and the instrumentality of the church.

Turretin’s second argument for faith preceding knowledge of the church derives from the unity of the church. Unity of the church, he argues, “supposes a preceding unity of faith in which believers are joined.”³⁶ Just as the right to have a share in a particular political state presupposes citizenship and just as communion within a family presupposes having been begotten from the same father, “so the church is a city and family of God, into which no one is admitted without faith; the necessity of faith precedes communion, constituted by it.”³⁷ Here, too, Turretin appears to be working with an adult convert as the model in his mind when arguing for the precedence of faith.

Existentially, for anyone who is not born in a Christian community, i.e., one’s parents do not belong to any Christian church, there would be no other way to become a Christian or to join the church except with a conviction of the truth of Christianity and, on that basis, a profession of faith. Even if this conviction develops over a period of time while associating with a church, logically, the conviction and faith must come first. The individual must first be persuaded before he joins. Furthermore, this persuasion does not come simply by assertion of authority by the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 18.1.9 (3:3).

³⁷ Ibid.

church. It comes as the church faithfully proclaims the gospel. What do we do, however, with those who are born within the Christian community, who are reared in Christian homes and taught the truths of the faith from birth? In the Reformed view, this child is part of the church. Logically, knowledge of doctrine still precedes faith in the sense that a public profession expressing affirmation of the Christian faith is required before a child goes from non-communicant to communicant status. In other words, in the Reformed tradition, a child must have sufficient knowledge of the Christian faith and must indicate she embraces that faith for herself before being permitted to participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The resolution to Turretin's struggle with "which comes first," the church or doctrine and faith, is found in reframing the whole discussion. Rather than asking which precedes, there simply should be a recognition that without doctrine and without faith, the church would cease to exist. The Word created the church. Jesus came preaching and teaching and the church began to be built as he did this work. If we trace the church even farther back in history to the time of Abraham, even here we see that God *called* Abraham—this is a spoken word—and established a people for himself, the nation of Israel, the church in the Old Testament era. Reformed doctrine has always acknowledged the continuity between the Old and New Testament assembly belonging to God so that the Jewish people of Ancient Israel were considered part of the church. Whether we think of the ancient people of God or those that come together distinctly as the church of Jesus Christ, both were constituted by the creative word of God, the word that goes forth and does not return to him empty. This same word, therefore, precedes faith as it is the

instrument through which God creates faith, through the Holy Spirit's activity, in individuals. To put it another way, the church is the creature or creation of the word.

At the same time, Turretin's question is resolved by recognizing what God has entrusted to the church. In other words, even though logically examination of doctrine and faith precede membership in the church, that doctrine and faith are made known through the church. The church is given the task of proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth and making disciples in the power of the risen Lord who promises to be with his people to the end of the ages. The Westminster Confession of Faith 25.3 puts it this way: "Unto this catholic visible Church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto." The very doctrine and word that create the church are entrusted to her to "gather and perfect" the saints or, as Horton puts it, "As such, the church does not *engage* in mission; it *is* a mission. God's embassy in the world."³⁸

Resolving the Tension: The Church as Locus of Grace

The foregoing tension between Divine and human agency in salvation is resolved, in a manner of speaking, by living with it. Rather than a perfected, indisputable resolution to the relationship between Divine and human agency in

³⁸ Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 32.

salvation, Reformed theology has established a kind of dialectical approach holding the human work in tension with the Divine even though the preeminence and greater emphasis is placed on the Divine. Never for a moment, even when God uses humans to accomplish his ends, does Reformed thought want to displace God's Divine sovereignty and freedom to act nor to claim for humans the power to change hearts and lives. This dialectical approach seeking to balance the tension can be seen in the visible / invisible church distinction. The visible church is defined, for example, by the Westminster Larger Catechism as "a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion, and of their children."³⁹ But, before this statement is made, the prior question in the Larger Catechism indicates that, within the bounds of the visible church, there are some who are not saved, that is, reconciled to God: "All that hear the gospel, and live in the visible church, are not saved; but they only who are true members of the church invisible."⁴⁰ Even though the visible church is the work of God, it does not represent God's people in fullness. The full manifestation and completion of God's salvific work is identified as the invisible church for "The invisible church is the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the head."⁴¹ The invisible church is the work of God and includes all who have truly been renewed and, therefore, are reconciled with God and fully given all the blessings and benefits of grace. The invisible church highlights the doctrines of

³⁹ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 62.

⁴⁰ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 61.

⁴¹ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 64.

election and predestination both of which situate all redemptive power in God who sovereignly elects and determines those in whom he will decisively work his grace.

In some sense, the invisible church is a theoretical or theological construct even though Calvin, for example, argues that some biblical references to the church have to do with the visible while others the invisible:

For we have said that Holy Scripture speaks of the church in two ways. Sometimes by the term “church” it means that which is actually in God’s presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Then, indeed, the church includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world. Often, however, the name “church” designates the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ....In this church are mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance.⁴²

Notwithstanding Calvin’s point that, in Scripture, the term “church” is applied to the so-called “invisible church,” the concept of the invisible is a theoretical construct because it is intangible and unidentifiable from a *human* perspective. Certainly, it is not theoretical from the Divine vantage point because it includes precisely all those whom God sees and chooses. As Calvin himself puts it, “Just as we must believe, therefore, that the former church, invisible to us, is visible to the eyes of God alone, so we are commanded to revere and keep communion with the latter [the visible church], which is called ‘church’ in respect to men.”⁴³ But, what may be visible to God, being invisible to man, can only be described as a construct, a convention to aid

⁴² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), Library of Christian Classics XXI, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2:1021, bk. 4.1.7.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.7 (2:1022).

our understanding of the church and to appreciate its depth beyond what we can see with our own eyes.

Some Reformed theologians have questioned the visible / invisible distinction. Murray raised objections to the entire visible / invisible church construct because, in his estimation, nowhere does Scripture speak of the church as invisible:

These considerations suffice to show that it is impossible to dissociate the church visible from the relevance and application of the various propositions in these contexts. Hence, even in those passages in which the concept of the 'church invisible' might appear to be present, the case is rather that there is no evidence for the notion of the 'church' as an invisible entity distinct from the church visible.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, Murray acknowledges that "the church has invisible aspects." These aspects include the reality that only God knows infallibly those who are his along with the fact that "the actions of God by which men are made members of the body of Christ are of such a character that they are imperceptible to men."⁴⁵ Although he does not himself offer a list of substitute terms, Murray argues, "Other terms can more appropriately and safely be used to express these various aspects or attributes which have been characterized as invisible."⁴⁶ At the end, what Murray is drawing to our attention is that whatever "invisible" dimensions the church may have, if we choose to speak of the invisible church, we are using what I am describing as a theoretical construct or convention not an actually existing entity separate or distinct from the church visible.

⁴⁴ John Murray, "The Church: Its Definition in Terms of 'Visible' and 'Invisible' Invalid," *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 1:234.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 235.

Rather than entirely doing away with the visible / invisible distinction, the construct is salvaged and proves useful when it is understood as an eschatological distinction, the difference between the already and the not yet, bringing into view another distinction often made, that between the church militant and the church triumphant—itsself an eschatological distinction. Berkhof, for example, notes that some have interpreted the term “invisible” applied to the church as a reference “(a) to the triumphant Church; (b) to the ideal and completed Church as it will be at the end of the ages” among other things.⁴⁷ Calvin himself acknowledges this dimension of the invisible church when he writes, “Then, indeed, the church includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world.”⁴⁸ Calvin distinguishes between those “presently living on earth” and the “elect *from the beginning of the world* [emphasis mine],” who are now part of the church triumphant. God has an end point, a final destination for the church which is not yet known by experience but will be someday. As such, it remains invisible to us and an object of faith and hope: “The Church in its ideal sense, the Church as God intends it to be and as it will once become, is an object of faith rather than of knowledge.”⁴⁹ Or, as Murray puts it,

Beyond doubt the reference in the term ‘church’ extends beyond the confines of this age and has its outreach to the age to come (cf. Eph. 3:21; 5:27). The church glorified is contemplated. But when this age gives place to the age to come and the whole body of Christ is perfected, we may not think of the church as invisible. It will be consummated in visibility.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 565.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.7 (2:1021).

⁴⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 565.

⁵⁰ Murray, “The Church: Its Definition,” 234.

Horton offers this helpful explanation:

Even the visible church, with all of its weeds sown among the wheat, can be regarded as a unity generated by the Word and Spirit, although its eschatological unity is only as yet provisional and largely hidden. In this way, the invisible-visible distinction remains useful, but is given a more eschatological emphasis. The church triumphant is simply the church militant that has ceased from its warfare, entering God's sanctuary in worship together with the cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1-2). Similarly, the invisible church is not a different church, but is the final form of the visible church that is known only to God and will be revealed at the last day.⁵¹

The visible/invisible distinction supports my contention that the church is the locus or place of grace in Reformed thought. For one, the visible church remains the entry point into the invisible church. The invisible church clearly is that which has fully received God's grace—the endpoint of the church triumphant. The invisible is made fully visible in the last judgment when the sheep are separated from the goats. In the eschaton, those who are in the visible church but not truly part of the church will be put out. In other words, the visible church is purified. Even though there may be those who are not in the visible who will be manifested as part of the ultimate invisible true church, this is not the norm. Rather, the norm is to be in the visible church and, therefore, part of the invisible manifested in the eschaton or, not to be part of the invisible church truly and therefore cast out of the visible in the eschaton.

I will return below to discuss the instrumental role of the visible church. It is worth noting at this point, however, that the visible is tasked with “gathering and perfecting the saints.”⁵² The saints are “out there,” the fields are ripe for harvest.

⁵¹ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 717.

⁵² Westminster Confession of Faith 25.3.

Hence, those who are already in the church are called to bring in the sheaves, to call out so that the saints will come in. It is *saints* who come into the church even while Reformed thought acknowledges the presence of hypocrites. One can only be called a saint if she has received God's grace in Christ. Once again, this reaffirms my contention that the church is the locus of grace in Reformed thought.

In addition to the visible/invisible distinction, virtually all the metaphors for the church in Reformed thought highlight it as the place, the locus of grace. I will focus on three key metaphors which were chosen by Van Genderen and Velema in their summary of Reformed ecclesiology: 1) church as the people of God, 2) church as the body of Christ, and 3) church as the temple of the Holy Spirit. Under these three metaphors, others will be noted that elucidate the three major categories. The following section is not meant to be an exhaustive enumeration and elucidation of Reformed metaphors for the church nor are the highlighted metaphors the exclusive domain of Reformed theology; they are found in the theology of other Christian traditions as well. In any case, these three metaphors provide a basis for arguing that the church is the locus of grace and thereby central to God's plan of salvation.

Before considering each of the metaphors in turn, it is important to draw attention to a principle underlying and undergirding all three, namely, the church is the "work" or creation of God. It is not an entity, reality, organism, or organization thought up and established by humans. It has Divine origins and it can be no other way. Even though the church can be studied as a sociological phenomenon since it is composed of people, what Van Genderen and Velema call the *theological approach* is determinative for the church's definition. A theological approach begins with the

data of special revelation, with what God himself has said his church is. Van Genderen and Velema put it this way:

However, through an analysis of the phenomenon called church and a comparison of the structures of the church with those of various societal groups, one cannot determine what the church in essence is. We know it from Scripture as *the church of God and the church of Christ*. We must view it in the light of what God does in Christ. The first question, therefore, is not what we observe of the church, but what we believe about it. The church is a matter of faith. This is how the Apostles' Creed puts it (*credo ecclesiam*).⁵³

To speak of the church as a "matter of faith" is to acknowledge that it is a reality that we know by God's revelation not through the discoveries of human reason even though we use that reason more fully to understand what God has given and revealed. This is another way of insisting that, to whatever extent God uses human means to draw and gather a people to himself, the final outcome of that work is a work of God himself. The church is "*the church of God and the church of Christ*." And "It does not owe its origin to human initiative, or its continued existence to human faithfulness. *The church is God's work*. It is a creation of the gospel."⁵⁴ Or, as Schwöbel puts it in reference to Luther's view: "The Church is *creatura verbi divini*: the creature of the divine Word."⁵⁵ For whatever differences might exist between Luther and Lutherans on one side and the Reformed on the other, the perspective

⁵³ J. Van Gemeren and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Gerrit Bilkes and Ed M. van der Maas (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 694.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 695.

⁵⁵ Christoph Schwöbel, "The Creature of the Word: Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers," *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, ed. Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 122. Schwöbel's overall argument is decidedly influenced by a Barthian perspective as he parses human and divine work by defining the human as mere witness to God. For another perspective on the church as creature of the divine word, see Michael S. Horton, *People and Place*, chapter 2: "*Creatura Verbi*: The Sacramental Word."

that the church is created by God through Christ and with special reference to the proclamation of the gospel is fully shared:

Whenever the Word is proclaimed, the Lord of the covenant assembles his people and the rainbow reappears amid dissipating clouds as God remembers the truce he has made with us. Through this canon—written, read, sung, and prayed—but especially as it is proclaimed anew, strangers to God and each other become a communion. Only this canon can create this particular community. It is through these Scriptures alone that the Spirit makes Christ’s mediatorial headship real in the life of the church, since it is only these texts that are “exhaled” (*theopneustos*) by the Spirit (1 Pet. 1:21; 2 Tim. 3:16).⁵⁶

Van Genderen and Velema also argue that the church must be viewed in the light of the work of God in Christ. This is another way of saying that the church is not part of the general created order or an institution established because of God’s common grace but a body that exists because of God’s special, redemptive, reconciling grace in Christ. The church, therefore, is the locus of grace because it is the work of God’s grace and, therefore, the place that his grace is found.

The Church as the People of God

The first metaphor to which I would like to draw attention that highlights the church as the locus or place of grace in Reformed thought is the church as the people of God. Under this rubric, the language of the church as a nation, a community, a society, a city, a remnant, and “the Israel of God,” could also be included. Calvin, for example, titles the fourth book of his *Institutes*, “The External Means or Aids by which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein.” Horton

⁵⁶ Horton, *People and Place*, 49.

highlights the city, remnant, and “Israel of God” themes.⁵⁷ What are the key features of the reformed understanding of the church as the people of God?

At the heart of the Reformed understanding of the church as the people of God stands the concept of God’s covenant, God’s unilaterally established union with those whom he chooses and calls to himself. Covenant lays the foundation for God’s redemptive, reconciliatory deeds specifically for his own. Van Genderen and Velema: “In the Old Testament Israel is called the people of God, because he chose to be the God of this people. In addition to election, we must also think of the covenant and of God’s redeeming acts.”⁵⁸ These redeeming acts are instigated because of God’s promises to the fathers, God’s covenant. As it is put in Deuteronomy 7:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face. You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today. (Deuteronomy 7:6–11 ESV)

The concept of the people of God is inseparable from the idea of the covenantal, promise-based bond between God and his own. To be the people of God is to be those who are in this kind of covenant relationship with God. God is the suzerain Lord and King, the church the vassal, servant kingdom. The suzerain rules over and

⁵⁷ See Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 721-3 and 727-33.

⁵⁸ Van Genderen and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 696.

cares for his vassals. Horton: “The church (in both testaments) is the covenant assembly. Even the image of the shepherd and the sheep was already a familiar analogy for the suzerain’s rule over and care for the sheep of his pasture—in other words, the various peoples under his patronage.”⁵⁹ The people of God designation of the church is a way of speaking of the entity of the church as a graced community, as specially privileged. Clowney puts it this way, “God’s people are his own possession, his treasure. The church is defined by belonging to God: ‘I will . . . be your God, and you will be my people’ (Lv. 26:12).”⁶⁰

The “people of God” designation is tied closely to the royal office of Christ. As a matter of fact, it is precisely because Christ is a king that he must have a kingdom or a people over whom he rules. The Belgic Confession puts it this way: “This Church hath been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof; which is evident from this, that Christ is an eternal king, which, without subjects, he can not be.”⁶¹ This King is a benevolent ruler reigning for the good of his people.

The Westminster Larger Catechism summarizes Christ’s kingship in this way:

Q. 45. How doth Christ execute the office of a king?

A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them; in bestowing saving grace upon his elect, rewarding their obedience, and correcting them for their sins, preserving and supporting them under all their temptations and sufferings, restraining and overcoming all their enemies, and powerfully ordering all things for his own glory, and their good; and also in taking vengeance on the rest, who know not God, and obey not the gospel.

⁵⁹ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 715.

⁶⁰ Edmund Clowney, *The Church*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1995), 29.

⁶¹ Belgic Confession 27 in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

Each component of Christ's kingship described in this catechism answer focuses on benefits that accrue to the people of God not least of which is saving grace and preservation. Thus, by definition, to speak of the church as the people of God or kingdom of Christ is to say the church is both the object of God's grace and the locus, the place where grace is found.

The Tetrapolitan Confession 17, "Of Baptism," reads

But since Baptism is the sacrament of the covenant that God makes with those who are his, promising to be their God and Protector, as well as of their seed, and to have them as his people, and finally, since it is a symbol of renewing through the Spirit, which occurs through Christ, our theologians teach that it is to be given infants also, no less than formerly under Moses they were circumcised. For we are indeed the children of Abraham. Therefore no less to us than to those of old pertains the promise: I will be thy God and the God of thy seed.⁶²

The Reformed emphasis on the church being the descendants of Abraham—another way of speaking of the church as the people of God—proves to be one more argument for the centrality of the church in God's plan of salvation, the church as locus of grace. When God made his covenant with Abraham, he promised not simply or only to be his God but the God of his seed after him. It was a generational promise intended to assure Abraham and his posterity that God had drawn near to them. It also obligated them to adhere to God and his precepts. This shows, first of all, the corporate nature of the covenant of grace. Even though the benefits of that covenant accrue to individual believers, it is always in association with the church. The covenant is made with a body and those who are part of that body receive the promised benefits. More precisely, the covenant is made with them

⁶² Tetrapolitan Confession 17 in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

through their representative head, Jesus Christ, in whom the promise to Abraham is fulfilled. As Horton reminds us, “The covenantal ecclesiology is furthered by the emphasis on corporate solidarity in a representative head. Just as the suzerain and vassal-people are united as shepherd and sheep, king and kingdom, the people are represented to the Great King through the mediation of one of their own.”⁶³ It is in this sense—the covenant with the people as a whole through their representative head—that we can speak of there being no salvation outside the church and hence the locus of grace.

The Church as the Body of Christ

The next metaphor favored in Reformed thought to describe the church is “body of Christ.” This designation, drawing on the Pauline conception in the NT, frequently is used to demonstrate the overarching or underlying unity that all Christians have with one another. As Berkhof puts it, “It [the body of Christ metaphor] stresses the unity of the Church, whether local or universal, and particularly the fact that this unity is organic....”⁶⁴ Each is a member of the body even when one is an arm, another an eye, another a leg. As Paul argues, we are all members of one body even when we are each given a different role or function within that body (1 Cor 12). More to the point of this chapter, the body metaphor in Reformed thought is inescapably bound to the presence of grace within and among the group designated the “body of Christ.” The primary argument tying the body to

⁶³ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 721.

⁶⁴ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 557.

grace is the designation of Christ as *head of the body*. Van Gemeren and Velema explain, “The notion that the church is the body of Christ has therefore great significance for mutual relationships. The apostle goes further, however, for he points specifically to the relationship between Christ and his church. In the epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, Christ is called *the Head of the body*.”⁶⁵ To speak of Christ as head of the body is to say there is a vital union with the church, a union that brings life to the body from Christ the head. The completion of the quote from Berkhof regarding the body metaphor reads, “and that the *organism of the Church stands in vital relationship* [emphasis mine] to Jesus Christ as her glorious head.”

It is Christ as vital head who unites his people to himself under his rule. The body is *his* body, not the body of any other entity or power. Hence, every part of that body receives his life-giving grace. The Second Helvetic Confession puts it clearly in chapter 17: “*The Church as Body*. It is also called the body of Christ because the faithful are living members of Christ under Christ the Head.” The members of the body of Christ are *living* members because they are vivified by Christ the Head: “It is the head which has the preeminence in the body, and from it the whole body receives life.”⁶⁶ On the basis of this understanding of the headship of Christ, we can safely conclude that the church is the locus of grace.

Encompassed within the body of Christ metaphor for the church is also the doctrine of the communion of saints. Within this doctrine are included three critical components that again direct attention to the church as locus of grace. First, the language of the communion of the saints brings into view communion or

⁶⁵ Van Gemeren and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 699.

⁶⁶ Second Helvetic Confession 17.

participation in the gifts and graces of Christ. Although the *ordo salutis* describes salvific benefits granted to individual believers, participation in Christ is addressed under the rubric of the communion of the saints. For example, the Second Helvetic Confession states:

What Is the Church? The Church is an assembly of the faithful called or gathered out of the world; a communion, I say, of all saints, namely, of those who truly know and rightly worship and serve the true God in Christ the Savior, by the Word and Holy Spirit, and who by faith are partakers of all benefits which are freely offered through Christ.⁶⁷

The church is described as a “communion...of all saints...who by faith are partakers of all benefits which are freely offered through Christ.” Saints are defined as those who partake of Christ’s benefits, of the graces that come through knowing Christ so that the communion of the saints is a community of those who participate in Christ.

The Westminster Confession makes the link between the communion of saints language and participation in the gifts and graces of Christ even clearer:

All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.⁶⁸

This statement is the first paragraph in the chapter entitled, “Of the Communion of the Saints.” The first point made is not about communion of saints as sharing in one another’s gifts but having fellowship with Christ “in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory.” The communion of the saints draws attention first and foremost to what believers possess in union with Christ.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith 26.1.

The Westminster Larger Catechism further elucidates this aspect of the communion of the saints under the rubric of the invisible church:

Q. 65. What special benefits do the members of the invisible church enjoy by Christ?

A. The members of the invisible church by Christ enjoy union and communion with him in grace and glory.

Q. 83. What is the communion in glory with Christ which the members of the invisible church enjoy in this life?

A. The members of the invisible church have communicated to them in this life the firstfruits of glory with Christ, as they are members of him their head, and so in him are interested in that glory which he is fully possessed of; and, as an earnest thereof, enjoy the sense of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, and hope of glory; as, on the contrary, sense of God's revenging wrath, horror of conscience, and a fearful expectation of judgment, are to the wicked the beginning of their torments which they shall endure after death.

Ultimately, the communion of saints is a communion of those who are truly saints, sanctified in Christ. Thus, the doctrine of election is once again seen to undergird the Confession's ecclesiology. To speak of the elect is to speak of those who receive God's grace reinforcing the reality that the church is the locus of grace.

Jan Rohls argues that the phrase "communion of saints" [*communio sanctorum*] was originally used in Reformed thought to highlight the election of the community but eventually shifted in meaning to a community of the elect placing the emphasis on elect individuals.⁶⁹ So, for example, the Heidelberg Catechism Q. 54, speaks of a "congregation" chosen for eternal life as opposed to a congregation of elect individuals:

Q. 54. *What do you believe concerning "the Holy Catholic Church"?*

⁶⁹ Rohls, *Reformed Confessions*, 166-7.

A. I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it.⁷⁰

In this setting, election is applied first to the “congregation” or community. The individual sees himself as a member of that elect body as opposed to elect in himself as an individual. Rohls notes, “Instead, as an elect communion, the church stands in relation to the whole of humanity.”⁷¹ In other Reformed confessions, the church came to be defined as a “communion of the elect.” As an example, Rohls points to the statement in the Westminster Confession in which the invisible church is defined as the “whole number of the elect.”⁷²

In any case, whatever shifts of emphasis may or may not have taken place, what should be acknowledged is that the community of the church in Reformed thought is *set in contrast* to the rest of the human race since it is the community belonging to God in Christ. It is the community gathered “from among the whole human race,” as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it. What is it that makes for the contrast? It is the fact that this communion, this community, is that which belongs to God in Christ and by his Spirit. Thus, it is the community where grace is found.

The grace found in the church is not limited to the union and communion with Christ of individuals or the elect community. It also includes their union and communion with one another especially in the gifts and graces given to each individual by the Spirit. As mentioned above, body language brings into view the

⁷⁰ Heidelberg Catechism Q. 54 in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

⁷¹ Rohls, *Reformed Confessions*, 167.

⁷² Westminster Confession of Faith 25.1.

variety of body parts—there are internal and external organs of the body each with its particular functions, functions that are at the same time gifts of God’s grace. With respect to Calvin, McNeill points out, “In addition to ‘*communio sanctorum*’ Calvin had earlier (1536) used the expressions ‘*numerus electorum*’ (or ‘*praedestinatorum*’) and ‘*coetus fidelium*’ as equivalents of ‘*ecclesia*.’ These phrases indicate his view that, on the one hand, the church is provided with members by divine predestination and that, on the other, it is an assembly or fellowship in which the members mutually communicate their blessings.”⁷³ This perspective comes to be codified in a variety of confessional documents including, for example, the Westminster Confession. In 26.1, the Confession insists, “being united to one another in love, they [the saints] have communion in each other’s gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.” This is further elucidated in the next paragraph that indicates such fellowship to include communion in worshiping God and in other “spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification.” In other words, whatever they have been given as graces of the Spirit are to be put into service as a blessing to one another. Furthermore, these graces are not limited to “spiritual” edification but also include “relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities.” God’s grace, expressed through his people, extends both to matters of soul and body.

⁷³ John T. McNeill, “The Church in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology,” *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 173.

Horton points out that the gifts and graces given to the church include, specifically, ordained offices: “In this ascension, he poured out his *grace* on all of his people and bestowed specific *graces*: pastors, evangelists, and teachers whose ministry will bring the whole body to maturity in Christ (Eph. 4:8-16).”⁷⁴ He further explains, “The *gifts* (plural) being distributed here by Christ in his ascension refer specifically to offices in the church. This involves giving graces (charismata) to those who hold such offices for their work.” These graces given both as offices and as the ability to do the work of the office are not simply given to individuals for themselves but are given to the community as a whole. They are given to the church as a whole: “However, in this passage [Eph. 4] the pastors, teachers, and evangelists are the gifts he gives to *his church* [emphasis mine].”⁷⁵ The Westminster Larger Catechism makes a similar point in the answer to Q. 45 when it states that one of the ways in which Christ executes his office as king is by giving “officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them” to his church. Similarly, the Second Helvetic Confession insists that “God has always used ministers for the gathering or establishing of a Church for himself, and for the governing and preservation of the same.”⁷⁶ Thus, in Reformed thought, the body of Christ, the church, is a graced and gifted body including the fact that it has been given church officers to work and govern among the body as a whole. Therefore, the church is the locus of grace.

⁷⁴ Horton, *People and Place*, 31.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷⁶ Second Helvetic Confession 18.

The Church as Temple of the Holy Spirit

The discussion of gifts of the Spirit provides a natural transition and a link from the metaphor of the church as body to the church as temple of the Holy Spirit. The metaphor of the church as temple is drawn from at least three biblical texts: 1 Cor 3:16, Eph 2:22, and 1 Pet 2:5. In each passage, the church as corporate entity composed of many members is in view. The many members together constitute the one temple.

The most significant contribution the temple metaphor makes beyond what has already been said under the rubrics “church as people of God” and “body of Christ” is that the temple imagery accentuates the presence of God with his people. Describing the move in ancient Israel from Sinai and the tabernacle to Jerusalem and the temple, Clowney writes, “When God shifted his assembly from Sinai to Zion, he taught us another principle: God came not only to meet with Israel, but to dwell with them. Sinai was a trysting-place in the wilderness; Jerusalem would be his dwelling place.”⁷⁷ Just as God was present with his people in the ancient day, so Jesus promises not to leave his disciples as orphans but to come to be with them. This promise finds its fulfillment at Pentecost:

At Pentecost, Jesus kept his promise, which is also the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4-5). The church does not live with a fading memory of the presence of the Lord, but with the reality of his coming in the Spirit. The people of God, claimed by Christ in the blood of the New Covenant, are made the fellowship of the Spirit as they await their returning Lord.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Clowney, *The Church*, 32.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

This presence of Christ through the Spirit constitutes the church as the temple of the Spirit: “the presence of Jesus constitutes the church as his temple, built of living stones, joined to him as God’s elect stone (1 Pet. 2:4-6).”⁷⁹

Van Gemeren and Velema argue that the presence of the Spirit in the church “invigorates the church, enabling it to live, grow, and function.”⁸⁰ Lying behind their statement—showing something of an ecumenical interest—is the idea of the Spirit as “soul” of the church mentioned in *Lumen Gentium* 7: “In order that we might be unceasingly renewed in him (see Eph 4:23), he has shared with us his Spirit, who, being one and the same in head and members, gives life to, unifies and moves the whole body. Consequently, his work could be compared by the Fathers of the church to the function that the principle of life, the soul, fulfills in the human body.”⁸¹ Van Gemeren and Velema argue that the Holy Spirit cannot be called the soul of the church because they do not see the Spirit’s relation with the church as analogous to the inseparability of human soul from human body and because they want to avoid equating all acts of the church with acts of the Spirit. Nevertheless, the concept of the Spirit as the One who gives life to the church—the heart of the idea of calling the Spirit the soul of the church—they fully endorse. Clowney agrees with this principle when he writes, “Secondly, the Spirit who possesses the church is also the Creator Spirit, the Author of life.”⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁸⁰ Van Gemeren and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 702.

⁸¹ *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing, 1996), 8.

⁸² Clowney, *The Church*, 59.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the church, his temple and dwelling, further solidifies my argument that the church is the locus of grace. Where God comes as life-giver, renewing his people, re-creating them in the image of the Son, God's grace is certainly present and found.

The Church as Instrument of Grace

In the preceding section, I argued that the church is the locus of grace in Reformed thought. In this section, I turn to the church as God's instrument of grace. Not only is the church the place where grace is found, it is also God's chosen and appointed means for mediating his grace both to those already in the church as well as those whom he is drawing to himself. As Calvin points out, God could perfect his people in an instant but has chosen instead to do so through the church: "We see how God, who could in a moment perfect his own, nevertheless desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the church."⁸³ Furthermore, just as in ancient times God did not entrust the teaching of his people to angels "but raised up teachers from the earth truly to perform the angelic office, so also today it is his will to teach us through human means."⁸⁴ God has also provided the sacraments, rightfully administered by the church, so that, as Calvin puts it, they help us "related to the preaching of the gospel...."⁸⁵

To clarify the instrumentality of the church, I will consider the marks of the true church, which marks also identify the work or calling of the church. This work

⁸³ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.5, (2:1017).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, *Institutes* 4.14.1 (2:1276).

or calling is indicative of the church's instrumentality of grace especially because the marks and callings are part and parcel of the means of grace. Word, sacrament, and prayer are all regarded as means of grace in Reformed thought with word and sacrament also considered to be two of the three marks of the true church. From there, I will identify the Reformed conviction of the ongoing headship and ministry of Christ and seek to ascertain where in the church this ongoing ministry is most evident. In the end, the headship of Christ, exercised through his threefold office as Prophet, Priest, and King will be shown to undergird the concept of the church as Christ's instrument for bringing his grace to his people.

The Marks are the Mission

One of the pressing questions that arose in the midst of the 16th century Protestant Reformation as well as being part of its aftermath was, "Where is the *true* Church to be found?" For whatever tension may have existed in the minds and theologies of the Reformed between Divine and human work in salvation, no one disputed the principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*. As Paul Avis put it, "Reformation theology is largely dominated by two questions: 'How can I obtain a gracious God?' and 'Where can I find the true Church?' The two questions are inseparably related and constitute two aspects of the overriding concern of sixteenth-century men with the problem of salvation, for the truth of the old patristic watchword *Nulla salus extra ecclesiam*—no salvation outside the Church—

was assumed on all sides.”⁸⁶ Paul Fries adds, “Calvin relishes the ancient dictum of Cyprian, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.”⁸⁷ With a commitment to this principle, the pressing question becomes where to find the true church so as to be in the place where God and his grace are found. At the same time, given the proliferation of Protestant churches within different locales of Christendom, one also had to determine with which of these churches one could associate—as well as which churches could enter into agreements for unity with other churches. These pressing concerns led to the articulation of the so-called “marks of the true church” as characteristics identifying that body called church concerning which one could be assured that God is found there.

Reformed theology distinguishes between the attributes of the church and marks of the true church. The attributes are equivalent to what is often referred to in the wider Christian tradition as *notae ecclesiae*, the “notes of the church.” Thus, Reformed believe the church has the attributes of being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. How each of these components is worked out and what it looks like in the end may differ from other Christian traditions but the commitment to them remains. As a matter of fact, Van Genderen and Velema argue that the attributes ought not to be viewed simply as descriptive terms but prescriptive. The attributes also describe the calling and mission of the church: “It is quite biblical to say that the church must become what it is. We therefore see the attributes of the church *first as gift and then*

⁸⁶ Paul D. L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 1. Reprint.

⁸⁷ Paul R. Fries, “Coordinates of a Theology of Office: Footnotes for an Emerging Narrative,” *Reformed Review* 56, no. 3 (2003): 199.

as calling."⁸⁸ So, a Reformed approach to each of the attributes would look something like the following: The church is not simply one in the mysterious sense of the mystical union of Christ with believers but she is called to pursue the outward manifestation of the spiritual, mystical unity she has because of Christ. Similarly, the church is not simply to be grateful for the righteousness of Christ or holiness of Christ imputed to her but is to pursue godly life as a body. The church should not simply be recognized as having a catholicity by virtue of being found in many nations but should pursue living out being a universal church, a church that is composed of humans from all backgrounds and every land on earth. And, the church is not apostolic merely because the apostles were key figures in its origins but because the church continues to believe the apostolic doctrine found in Scripture and seeks to take the gospel to the ends of the earth in a godly imitation of the Apostles.

Helpful as it is to take the attributes of the church as imperatives, or at least as a standard or goal, the attributes neither solve the Reformation dilemma concerning where the true church is to be found nor do they give complete direction for the nature of the church's mission and ministry. More must be said to be able to evaluate and judge whether a given local congregation or larger grouping of churches is indeed a true church. Thus, the attributes of the church are not left by themselves either as descriptive terms or imperatives to be obeyed but are supplemented by the doctrine of the marks of the church.

⁸⁸ Van Gemeren and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 708.

Although it has become customary to speak of the marks of the true church as threefold—the pure preaching of the gospel or word, the administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ, and the exercise of church discipline—there has been some difference of opinion whether the marks are threefold, twofold, or even single. While the Belgic Confession explicitly speaks of the three marks, the Second Helvetic speaks of two: preaching and sacraments.⁸⁹ Even so, in what can be described as a summation, the Second Helvetic reduces the marks to the preaching of God’s word: “but we teach that the true Church is that in which the signs or marks of the true Church are to be found, especially the lawful and sincere preaching of the Word of God as it was delivered to us in the books of the prophets and the apostles, which all lead us unto Christ....”⁹⁰ Note the “especially” in this section. Similarly, Calvin argued for two marks: the word and sacraments. He writes, “Wherever we see the word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists [cf. Eph. 2:20]. For his promise cannot fail: ‘Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them’ [Matt. 18:20].”⁹¹

In Calvin’s case, in fashion similar to the Second Helvetic Confession, the two marks are often resolved into one: the word. For example, in the Genevan Confession, Calvin writes,

While there is one only Church of Jesus Christ, we always acknowledge that necessity requires companies of the faithful to be distributed in different places. Of these assemblies each one is called Church. But in as much as all companies do not assemble in the name of our Lord, but rather to blaspheme

⁸⁹ Belgic Confession 27.

⁹⁰ Second Helvetic Confession 17.

⁹¹ *Institutes* 4.1.9 (2:1023).

and pollute him by their sacrilegious deeds, we believe that the proper mark by which rightly to discern the Church of Jesus Christ is that his holy gospel be purely and faithfully preached, proclaimed, heard, and kept, that his sacraments be properly administered, even if there be some imperfections and faults, as there always will be among men. *On the other hand, where the Gospel is not declared, heard, and received, there we do not acknowledge the form of the Church.* Hence the churches governed by the ordinances of the pope are rather synagogues of the devil than Christian churches.⁹² [emphasis mine]

Even though the marks of the church include both the word preached and the sacraments administered, when the Genevan Confession says that where the gospel is not declared and received, “we do not acknowledge the form of the Church,” it appears that the decisive mark is the ministry of the word. Avis remarks, “Even when Calvin discusses the marks of the word and sacrament, he seems prepared to resolve the latter into the former. In his treatise *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1544), Calvin makes the doctrine of Christ constitutive of the Church and seems to mention the sacraments as an afterthought.”⁹³ Even in the Belgic Confession that most explicitly articulates three marks of the true church, all three are undergirded by or ruled over by the one mark of the word: “in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church.”⁹⁴ As Bavinck summarized a century ago, the differences over whether there is only one mark or as many as three marks of the true church is “more a difference in name than in substance and that actually there is only one mark, the one and the same Word, which is variously administered and confessed in preaching, instruction, confession,

⁹² Geneva Confession 18 in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

⁹³ Avis, *The Church in the Reformers*, 31.

⁹⁴ Belgic Confession 27.

sacrament, life and so forth.”⁹⁵ Behind this emphasis on the word as mark of the true church lies the Reformed commitment to the principle of *sola Scriptura* and the belief that the church is *creatura verbi*, creature of the word.

It should be pointed out that “the word” and “the ministry of the word” as a mark of the true church is understood according to Reformed, or at least Protestant, doctrine. The final sentence of the paragraph in the Genevan Confession quoted above makes this clear as Calvin castigates the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Church: “Hence the churches governed by the ordinances of the pope are rather synagogues of the devil than Christian churches.” It is not simply that Scripture is read and taught but that it must be taught purely, i.e., in Protestant form. This is what is meant when the Belgic Confession speaks of “the pure doctrine of the gospel” being preached and mentions “the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ.”⁹⁶ In a manner of speaking, the marks of the true church come down to the question who has the gospel or who has the true doctrine.

Standing out from the other confessions, the Westminster Confession of Faith does not articulate a definitive position on marks of the true church. Instead, it recognizes a gradation or range of purity in doctrine and practice. Section 25.4 reads

This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.

⁹⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:312.

⁹⁶ Belgic Confession 27.

There is a shift in emphasis from defining marks to degrees of purity. Nevertheless, the word (“doctrine of the gospel”) and sacraments (“ordinances administered”) continue to be the marks that are evaluated to determine whether a church is a true church or if it is among those that have “so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan.”⁹⁷

Just as Van Gemeren and Velema argue that the attributes of the church (*notae ecclesiae*) are both gifts of God to the church and imperatives for the church to obey, so the marks of the true church are not simply evaluative principles but also define the mission of the church. This is where we begin to see the significance of the marks of the true church as indicative of the church’s instrumental role in mediating or ministering God’s grace. The marks are not mere characteristics or qualities but acts, actions, and activities of the church. They are observable and identifiable as distinct engagements and undertakings and represent tasks entrusted to the church or what we can also describe as callings. As the Westminster Confession puts it:

Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.⁹⁸

The fulfillment of these callings results in real, quantifiable changes—the saints are gathered and perfected. In other words, the callings are not empty rituals nor are they mere testimony to Christ but are the instruments by which Christ himself effects both gathering and perfecting.

⁹⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith 25.5.

⁹⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith 25.3.

Horton makes a similar argument and characterizes the marks as part of the exercise of the power of the keys. The marks are the mission of the church in opening and closing the kingdom: "As minister rather than master of the Lord's house, the church is visible not only as a witness to but also as the semi-realized inauguration of the kingdom to come. Since it is the era of gathering guests from the highways and byways to be seated at the heavenly banquet, the mission that the marks (Word, sacraments, and discipline) serve is that of opening and shutting doors."⁹⁹ To this Horton adds, "The question of the marks of the church is therefore bound up with the subject of the keys, with its Old Testament backdrop." As the church does the work of preaching the gospel, administering the sacraments, and exercising ecclesiastical discipline of faith and morals, the kingdom of heaven is being either opened or shut. If the kingdom is opened and shut by the power of the keys entrusted to the church, there can be no doubt of the church's role in ministering or mediating of grace and of its withholding. The church's exercise of the keys must, however, be in accordance with the Word of the King who gives the keys. As Horton notes, "In this in-between time, the business of the church is receiving and delivering the gift of salvation, not contributing to the gift, negotiating its terms, or determining its content."¹⁰⁰

Another way of expressing the idea that the church's marks are its mission is in recognizing that the marks represent the means of grace. It is customary in Reformed thought to describe the means of grace as threefold: word, sacrament, and prayer. Two of these three are also marks of the church. In other words, the marks

⁹⁹ Horton, *People and Place*, 242.

¹⁰⁰ Horton, *People and Place*, 242.

identify the means by which God's grace is offered to people and truly brought to them. As a matter of fact, we find in the Reformed confessions that the word as a mark of the true church is understood as the *preached* word. In its statement of the marks of the true church, the Second Helvetic Confession speaks of the "lawful and sincere preaching of the Word of God as it was delivered to us in the books of the prophets and the apostles, which all lead us unto Christ...."¹⁰¹ It is the reading of Scripture but especially the preaching of Scripture that is understood in historic Reformed thought to be a means of grace, as the Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 155 puts it:

Q. 155. How is the word made effectual to salvation?

A. The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but *especially the preaching* [emphasis mine] of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; or building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.

The effect of the preached word is to draw sinners to Christ and to conform them to his image, which is to say, the preached word is a means of grace. And, it is not simply the word as deposit to be guarded that has been entrusted to the church but the preaching, proclamation, and promulgation of that word.

It is not only the word, however, by which God offers his grace but also through the sacraments given to the church. Once again from the Westminster Larger Catechism:

Q. 162. What is a sacrament?

¹⁰¹ Second Helvetic Confession 17.

A. A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ *in his church* [emphasis mine], to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his mediation; to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces; to oblige them to obedience; to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another; and to distinguish them from those that are without.

The benefits of Christ’s mediation are exhibited—in the sense of the Latin *exhibere*, “to hold forth”—through the sacraments. And, the sacraments strengthen and increase the faith of the church.

The Mother Metaphor or Calvin’s Doctrine of Homeschooling

The marks as mission of the church are seen in Calvin’s thought in his mother metaphor for the church. His concern in Book 4 of his *Institutes*, according to its title, is to articulate “The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein.” The external means include the church, especially the ministry of the word but also discipline; the sacraments, which are entrusted to the church; and civil government. This last one—which is not of concern in the present project—must be seen in light of Calvin’s commitment to a form of Christendom such that it was not only church that needed to be reformed but also Christian society as a whole. It is under the rubric of external aids that he gives the title “mother” to the church saying in the introduction, “For what God has joined together, it is not lawful to put asunder’, so that, for those to whom he [God] is Father the church may also be Mother.”¹⁰² There is no doubt of Cyprian’s influence on Calvin’s selection of the “mother” title.

¹⁰² Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.1 (2:1012).

Calvin's description of the church as mother is a picture of care, concern, and nurture. He speaks of nourishment as a mother would provide for her children. We find love and kindness here for the good of believers. She must conceive us, give birth to us, nourish us with her milk, and keep us in her care and guidance until we become like the angels. At the same time, the mother's role is instructional, which is why I like to describe Calvin's view as homeschooling.

But because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title "mother" how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation, as Isaiah and Joel testify.... By these words God's fatherly favor and especial witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church.¹⁰³ (*Institutes* 4.1.4)

How exactly does all this take place? The answer lies in Calvin's emphasis on the educational role of the church in the life of believers. The educational task is far more than the imparting of information. It has to do with proclaiming the word of God in the power of the Spirit. While discussing the communion of the saints and the connection of election to the church and the unity of the church, Calvin makes the point that it is by the kindness of God the Father and through the working of the Holy Spirit that we enter into fellowship with Christ and are, therefore, God's property and possession: "but to establish with certainty in our hearts that all those who, by the kindness of God the Father, through the working of the Holy Spirit, have entered into fellowship with Christ, are set apart as God's property and personal

¹⁰³ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.4 (2:1016).

possession; and that when we are of their number we share that great grace.”¹⁰⁴

Elsewhere, Calvin makes a strong case for never separating the Spirit from God’s word.¹⁰⁵ So, when the church proclaims the word, the Spirit is at work through that word to build us up.

The homeschooling, childrearing work of the church is focused, in Calvin’s thought, in the work of pastors and teachers of the church. They are entrusted with the work of edification which is to say ministering God’s word to the people for their growth in faith and sanctification in character. Calvin insists that God has chosen to bring believers to maturity—as he puts it, to manhood—by the education of the church. In the next sentence, he specifies the means in the church by which this education takes place: “We see the way set for it: the preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon the pastors.”¹⁰⁶ A couple of sentences later, Calvin adds:

God breathes faith into us only by the instrument of his gospel, as Paul points out that “faith comes from hearing” [Rom. 10:17]. Likewise, the power to save rests with God but (as Paul again testifies) He displays and unfolds it in the preaching of the gospel [*ibid.*].

By this plan He willed of old that holy assemblies be held at the sanctuary in order that the doctrine taught by the mouth of the priest might foster agreement in faith. The Temple is called God’s “resting place” [Ps. 132:14]; the sanctuary, his “dwelling” [Isa. 57:15], where he is said to sit among the cherubim [Ps. 80:1]. Glorious titles, they are used solely to bring esteem, love, reverence, and dignity to the ministry of the heavenly doctrine. Otherwise, the appearance of a mortal and despised man would much detract from them. To make us aware, then, that an estimable treasure is given in

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.1.3 (2:1015-6).

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Calvin’s *Reply to Sadoleto (1539)* in John Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, Library of Christian Classics, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954).

¹⁰⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.5 (2:1017).

earthen vessels [II Cor 4:7], God himself appears in our midst, and, as Author of this order, would have men recognize him as present in his institution.

Accordingly, after he forbade his people to devote themselves to auguries, divinations, magic arts, necromancy, and other superstitions [Deut. 18:10-11; Lev. 19:31], he added that he would give what ought to suffice for all: that they should never be destitute of prophets [cf. Deut. 18:15]. But as he did not entrust the ancient folk to angels but raised up teachers from the earth truly to perform the angelic office, so also today it is his will to teach us through human means.¹⁰⁷

Clearly, in Calvin's thought, it is through the institution of the church's teaching officers, the pastors, that God works his transforming grace in his people. It is the gospel *proclaimed* that effects faith and it is doctrine taught that nourishes. All of this takes place in and through the church.

There will be more to say about the pastoral office, as well as the offices of ruling elder and deacon, in subsequent chapters. At this point I make the foregoing observations to support my contention that the church in Reformed thought is God's chosen instrument to minister his grace to people, grace that both effects faith and nourishes, sanctifies. As McNeill summarizes the Reformers ecclesiology, "They held in common a high conception of the church as the divinely ordained agency through which souls are 'revivified' and sanctified. The church is the holy spouse of Christ and likewise, as Calvin said, mother of those to whom God is a Father."¹⁰⁸

Even though the marks of the true church are often reduced to the single mark of pure gospel proclamation or the instruction in right doctrine, the sacraments and discipline are, without question, held to be means God uses, through

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ John T. McNeill, "The Church in Sixteenth Century Reformed Theology," *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), 177.

the church, to minister his grace. As more will be said about each of these in chapters three and four respectively, I mention them here because they are closely connected to the next part of my argument for the instrumentality of the church in mediating God's grace.

The Head is Still the Head

So far in this section, I have been pointing out a variety of perspectives on the marks of the church and tasks of the church that demonstrate the Reformed commitment to the idea that the church is God's chosen instrument to mediate his transforming grace. How does this address or work with the tension in Reformed thought noted earlier between Divine and human work in the realm of grace? How is it that a Divine work—applying grace to the hearts and lives of people—takes place through an institution composed of human members? The answer lies in the belief that Jesus Christ, the Head of the church is still the Head. All ministry in the church is the ministry of Christ the Head.

It is a given of Reformed theology that all church power and authority stems from Christ as head.¹⁰⁹ Part of the Reformers' protest in the 16th century was against the power and authority of the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope. Many regarded the title "Vicar of Christ" as an indication of papal usurpation of authority that belonged only to God. For example, the Belgic Confession argued "As for the

¹⁰⁹ For a helpful discussion of nineteenth-century Reformed theologians on the headship of Christ as the source of the church's power, see A. Craig Troxel, "Divine Right' Presbyterianism and Church Power" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998), 141-71.

false Church, she ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ.” Or, against the papacy, the Westminster Confession asserted, “There is no other head of the Church, but the Lord Jesus Christ; nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof.”¹¹⁰ The Second Helvetic Confession argued, “Also, there is one head of the body, and it is suited to the body. Therefore the Church cannot have any other head besides Christ. For as the Church is a spiritual body, so it must also have a spiritual head in harmony with itself.”¹¹¹ Included at the heart of the idea of Christ’s headship is the fact that he alone is the pastor and shepherd of his church:

Christ the Only Pastor of the Church. For we teach that Christ the Lord is, and remains the only universal pastor, and highest Pontiff before God the Father; and that in the Church he himself performs all the duties of a bishop or pastor, even to the world’s end; and therefore does not need a substitute for one who is absent. For Christ is present with his Church, and is its life-giving Head.¹¹²

Calvin, too, in his discussion of the pastoral office within the rubric of his mother metaphor for the church, insists that Christ’s use of human ministers is actually Christ’s way of maintaining his own headship and authority:

For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments. He so esteems the authority of the church that when it is violated he believes his own diminished.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Belgic Confession 27. Westminster Confession of Faith 25.6.

¹¹¹ Second Helvetic Confession 17.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.10 (2:1024).

The conclusion to which this leads is that, in Reformed thought, all ministry and all office derive from Christ the head. And, not only do they derive from him but must be understood as his activity, his work.

Even though Jesus Christ is not physically present on earth, he continues to minister within it. This is a point strongly argued by the 19th century Scottish Presbyterian theologian, James Bannerman. Bannerman distinguishes between Christ as *founder* of a society and as *administrator*. Founders relate to a society “in the sense of giving to it its origin and existence, impressing upon it its original character and constitution, arranging its office-bearers, and framing its laws; so that the society shall stand related to him as its author.”¹¹⁴ But, this relationship does not mean that the founder continues or stands as its ongoing administrator. He might even leave the society after it is founded or hand over its administration entirely to someone other than himself. But, argues Bannerman, with respect to Christ, he is not only the founder of the society of the church but its administrator. This means that all power and authority remain in him and he exercises them in the church: “He [Christ] is not only the Founder of the Christian Church; He is also the Ruler and Administrator of it, in such a way that He keeps in His own hand all the power and authority and grace that belong to the society, and is ever present directly and with His own hand to exercise that power, to administer that authority, and to dispense that grace.”¹¹⁵ For Bannerman, the presence of Christ in his church is part and parcel of Christ’s headship: “He is the Head of the Church *in this sense*,

¹¹⁴ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (1868; repr., New York: Westminster Publishing House, 2002. Reprint.), 1:198.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:199

that the Church is not only indebted to Him for its existence at first, but for its life and well-being ever since; *in this sense*, that it is not the Church that governs and dispenses ordinances and spiritual graces in His name, and by reason of His original gift and endowment to her, but Christ who, personally present, governs and administers ordinances and blessing through the Church.”¹¹⁶

The concept of Christ’s ongoing ministry in the church has been more recently articulated by Paul Fries in summary form. As Fries seeks to lay the groundwork for an understanding of office in the church, he argues that Christ is the only minister in the church and all offices simply “re-present” him to the church and the world. Fries writes, “Christ is the only true minister of the church; the offices represent (in the sense of re-present) him in the church even as the church re-presents him in the world. Better said: Christ presents himself to the church through the offices and to the world through the church.”¹¹⁷ The ministry that is done by the offices ultimately is the ministry of Christ himself with the human offices functioning as those through whom Christ is made present.

What Bannerman has articulated is also indicated in the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms when they speak of the perpetuity of Christ’s exercise of his threefold office as Prophet, Priest, and King. The Larger Catechism expresses it this way in question and answer 42:

Q. 42. Why was our mediator called Christ?

A. Our mediator was called Christ, because he was anointed with the Holy Ghost above measure; and so set apart, and fully furnished with all authority

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷Fries, “Coordinates of a Theology of Office,” 199.

and ability, to execute the offices of prophet, priest, and king of his church, in the estate both of his humiliation and exaltation.

Christ was prophet, priest, and king during his earthly ministry when he took upon himself human nature and entered into the suffering phase of his ministry, his humiliation. Christ continues as prophet, priest, and king in his exaltation, beginning with his resurrection through his ascension and presently continuing session at the Father's right hand.¹¹⁸ Each of the questions and answers in the Larger Catechism addressing the threefold office clearly indicate Christ's *ongoing* exercise of them. For example, as prophet, he reveals to the church "*in all ages*, by his Spirit and Word...the whole will of God, in all things concerning their edification and salvation."¹¹⁹ As priest, not only did Christ reconcile his people to God but also continues to fulfill his priesthood "in making continual intercession for them."¹²⁰ As king, not only does he call a people to himself, he gives them "officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them."¹²¹ To this, the Catechism also adds other ongoing royal services. All of these questions and answers leave no doubt of the Reformed understanding that all ministry in the church is ultimately the ministry of Christ. Whatever human ministry takes place, it must be understood in light of this Divine ministry of the Head of the church. All authority and actual power remain in him even as he uses officers of the church to accomplish his ends. For this reason, Reformed church orders uniformly speak of the authority of the church as "ministerial and declarative" as opposed to inherently powerful and

¹¹⁸ See Westminster Larger Catechism Q.'s 46-56 for more on Christ's estates of humiliation and exaltation.

¹¹⁹ Emphasis mine. Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 43.

¹²⁰ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 44.

¹²¹ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 45.

authoritative.¹²² In other words, all authority exercised in the preaching of the word, the administration of sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline derives not from power inherent to the church but from the power and authority of Christ himself. Hence, the church's ministry ought to make plain what has already been bound or loosed in heaven and by heaven.

The Form of Christ's Ministry: Prophet, Priest, and King

In the foregoing discussion of the perpetuity of Christ's ministry in the church, the questions and answers from the Westminster Larger Catechism not only make the point that this ministry is perpetual but they highlight the form of Christ's ongoing ministry, namely, that he continues to exercise the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. What this implies is that the structure and functions of the ordained ministries of the church should reflect and make manifest the *munus triplex*. They should so function that they are in keeping with the work that Christ does in his office as head of the church. Troxel demonstrates that the idea that Christ exercises his headship through the *munus triplex* is attested in the nineteenth century Presbyterian theologians he surveys in his dissertation although it does not seem to have exerted a controlling force on their understanding or, as Troxel put it, "it cannot be said that this viewpoint lay at the center of their understanding of Christ's headship."¹²³ It is my contention, given the Reformed understanding of the

¹²² For examples of this language, see the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church USA, section F-3.0107 Church Power; and *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, Form of Government, III.3.

¹²³ Troxel, "Divine Right Presbyterianism," 142.

munus triplex, that it should be at the center of a Reformed understanding of Christ's headship over the church and, therefore, also control the understanding of ordained ministry. In chapters two, three, and four, I hope to articulate more fully the Reformed understanding of each one of the threefold office of Christ and its relationship to the three ordained offices in Reformed churches of pastor, ruling elder, and deacon.

The relationship between the *munus triplex* and ordained office in the church has been pointed out by a number of Reformed theologians. R. B. Kuiper, in his volume on ecclesiology, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, argues that ministry in the church is threefold based on the *munus triplex*. He draws a connection between the prophetic office of Christ and the pastoral office in the church, between the royal office of Christ and the office of elder, and between the priestly office of Christ and the diaconal office. Kuiper begins with an understanding of the "general office" of the believer rooted in the threefold office of Christ so that every Christian, ordained to special office or not, participates in Christ's threefold office. Out of this participation, however, some are called to the narrower circle of ordained office and also exhibit the threefold office in their official functions. Kuiper explains,

Christ means *Anointed*. He was anointed with the Holy Spirit to the threefold office of prophet, priest and king. Every Christian, too, is anointed with the Holy Spirit to the selfsame threefold office. But it is also true that the special offices in the church represent Christ as prophet, priest and king. The minister or teaching elder represents Him as prophet, the deacon represents Him as priest, and the ruling elder represents Him as king. It follows that the universal office and the special offices are inseparable. Precisely expressed, the special offices are rooted in the universal office.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 134.

Kuiper appears to be in keeping with the Dutch Reformed tradition.¹²⁵ Although Kuiper is on the right path to see a link between the threefold office of Christ and the ordained offices of the church, I believe his specific connection between each office and its counterpart in the *munus triplex* is mistaken. As I will argue in subsequent chapters, both the prophetic and priestly dimensions of the *munus triplex* find their ecclesiological manifestation primarily or centrally in the office of pastor while the royal dimension is expressed in differing form in the offices of elder and deacon. The pastoral office also manifests the royal dimension so that, having all three coinciding, it most fully represents the *munus triplex*. The three offices in the church and their connection to the threefold office of the Head of the church will be the subjects in the following three chapters.

¹²⁵ See, for example, Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary: A Brief Examination of the Church Order of the Synod of Dort* (Wyoming, Mich.: Credo Books, 2009), 16. Van Dellen and Monsma write, “For this same reason the New Testament period has three primary offices; no more, no less: Ministers, Deacons, and Elders, representing Christ respectively as Prophet, Priest, and King of His Church.”

CHAPTER 2

CHRIST THE PROPHET:
MEDIATION THROUGH THE WORD AND
THE TEACHING OFFICE OF THE CHURCH

In the previous chapter, I argued that Reformed ecclesiology recognizes the church both as locus of grace—the place where grace is ordinarily found—and the instrument of grace—God’s usual means of bringing his grace to his people. I also argued that this centrality of the church in God’s plan of salvation must be subsumed under the headship of Christ over the church. In other words, Christ is the one who exercises all rule and authority and is the only true office-holder. All ministry that takes place is Christ’s ministry. As the Second Helvetic Confession puts it, “in the Church he [Christ] himself performs all the duties of a bishop or pastor, even to the world’s end.; [Vicar] and therefore does not need a substitute for one who is absent.”¹ Yet, he chooses to exercise that ministry using human instruments within the church. Furthermore, I argued that Christ’s ministry as head of the church takes the threefold form of the *munus triplex* so that both Christ himself and his instruments minister under the rubric of prophet, priest, and king. In this chapter, I intend to describe the nature of Christ’s prophetic office and how Christ continues to exercise it through the pastoral office in the church. Before proceeding, however, the concepts of office and of Mediator need to be addressed so we can better explain Christ’s prophetic mediation and the ministerial mediation involved in pastoral office.

¹ Second Helvetic Confession 17 in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

The Concept of Office

It is customary in Reformed systematic theology to distinguish between the person and work of Christ. Discussions under the rubric of the person of Christ tend to focus on ontological questions addressing the Divinity of Christ, his two natures, the hypostatic union, and so forth. Loci under the work of Christ typically include atonement, mediation, and other aspects related to Christ's redemptive and reconciliatory work. Whatever the inherent weaknesses of this sort of schematization—for example, too much potential separation between the person and work of Christ—the distinction between person and work helps elucidate what is meant by the term “office” both with respect to Christ's own fulfillment of the *munus triplex* and with respect to those who serve in ordained office in the church. To speak of the work of Christ is to speak of office.

Key to understanding office is the recognition that “office” is not so much a station or status descriptor as it is a work or service. For example, with respect to publicly elected government officials, we describe them or refer to them as “serving in office” or with other similar phrases, “served in office,” “filled the office,” etc. Election to political office generally carries with it honor and prestige. Nevertheless, the office is given not for the status it conveys but for doing a work, for engaging in a specific service for the good and benefit of the community to which the office belongs. In other words, office entails an assigned responsibility to be fulfilled. Responsibility is an important term as well in relation to office because the work of an office is to bear the weight and concerns of those for whom the office is established. It is to see to it that all necessary tasks are fulfilled.

When we speak of an office as work, we do not mean that it is simply a task or an occupation or a profession. Rather, it is an authoritative and authorized position. As Van Genderen and Velema put it, “To practice an occupation or profession is different from holding an office.”² The difference lies in the fact that an office is an appointed position, a role to which an individual is assigned by the appropriate authoritative body or person while a profession or occupation only describes the type or kind of work being done. Thus, an office derives its authority from the person or body making the appointment. Similarly, an office-holder derives authority from the office itself rather than having innate authority to accomplish the purposes, tasks, callings, and responsibilities of a given office. These tasks, callings, responsibilities would not be his apart from the office. As authority is derived from the one that confers office so the office-holder is accountable to the one making the appointment. Once again, Van Gemeren and Velema: “an office indicates a role in which a person derives authority from his appointment and is accountable to the one who appoints him.”³

Another way of describing office is to explain it using the terminology of “commission.” To be commissioned is to be called to and given an assignment to fulfill within parameters established by the one giving the commission. Furthermore, to be commissioned is to act at the behest of another as opposed to acting on one’s own initiative. G. C. Berkouwer explains, “It [the term “office”] obviously expresses the fact that one does not act on his own initiative but fulfills a

² J. Van Gemeren and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Gerrit Bilkes and Ed M. van der Maas (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 464.

³ Ibid.

given *commission*, as the Old Testament already stresses.”⁴ Commissioning in the Old Testament is associated with anointing for office and brings into view not only appointment to a task but equipping for it. In other words, to be placed in office implies both commissioning and the empowerment to fulfill the commission. The empowerment is a necessary component since anointing assumes that, prior to its application, the anointed one is not prepared or equipped to fulfill the calling. Berkouwer puts it this way, “The anointing, moreover, symbolizes the insufficiency of the anointed, since the commission carries with it a promise that the office-bearer will be given the qualifications for his task.”⁵

With regard to Christ, it is important to say that the language of “insufficiency” should not be taken to imply that he is less Divine than the Father or that any sinful weakness is attributed to him. Rather, the emphasis here is on the commissioning and anointing to *office* and, therefore, brings into view his messianic and mediatorial work as well as his relationship to the Holy Spirit. In other words, we are in the realm of Spirit-Christology and the economic Trinity. In contrast to Christ, with respect to the men ordained to office in the church, there is both weakness in general and sinful weakness in particular that requires Divine intervention in order to equip for service in office. In that regard, the concept of office should be seen closely intertwined with the concept of the gifts of the Spirit. Office is conferred as a gift of Christ through the Spirit upon those whom God

⁴ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Cornelius Lambregtse (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), 63.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

chooses and calls in order to serve him in the church.⁶ I will return, briefly, to this point below. However, a discussion both of the gifts of the Spirit and of Spirit-Christology lies outside the scope of the present project so will not be given the detailed attention each deserves in its own right. I make these observations here to clarify my assumptions moving forward.

A final point about office that should be made is that “office” is a *recognized, public* calling. Van Gemeren and Velema, for example, with reference to Christ’s baptism write, “What happened at his baptism in the Jordan had the nature of unambiguous designation and public appointment.”⁷ In other words, not only is there appointment to office, commissioning, empowerment, etc., the work of office is one that is visible to and should be recognized by the body of the church as an authority-carrying position as well as a Divinely authorized position. All Christians are called to serve Christ in and through the church as well as in their daily lives. All are given talents and abilities and should put those into the Savior’s service. However, not every individual who is gifted and empowered is called to formal office that bears Divine authority and *responsibility* for the church. Both in the case of Christ fulfilling, in an ultimate way, the threefold office and in the case of ordained office-bearers, the service rendered on behalf of and for the benefit of the body as a whole goes beyond the general “one another” care, concern, and service performed by all members of the church. The fulfillment of office carries a representative sense

⁶ See, for example, Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, Countours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 65-9 and 199-214; Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 207-12.

⁷ Van Gemeren and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 465.

so that what officers do they do for those for whom they are in office. Office is *pro nobis*, for us, for our benefit. This *pro nobis* dimension of office is part and parcel of the work of Christ in his fulfillment of the *munus triplex* as well as being part and parcel of the work of church officers.

The Office of Mediator: The Threefold Office of Christ

Although the threefold office of Christ is not solely the property of Reformed theology, in many ways it is synonymous with it. As Stephen Edmondson has demonstrated, Calvin's entire Christology is undergirded and formed by the concept of the *munus triplex*.⁸ Butin has shown how the *triplex*, through the influence of Reformed catechisms, informed Barth's theology and the structuring of his *Dogmatics*.⁹ The threefold office plays a role in Schleiermacher's thought as well.¹⁰ Thus, whether in the classical, neo-orthodox, or liberal Reformed tradition, the threefold office of Christ is part and parcel of the ways of thought and understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ and, thereby, impacts all theological loci.

The concept of Christ fulfilling offices or, at least, having official titles ascribed to him goes back to the New Testament documents themselves and is

⁸ Stephen Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁹ Phil Butin, "Two Early Reformed Catechisms, the Threefold Office, and the Shape of Karl Barth's Christology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991): 195-214.

¹⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, eds. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 438-75.

found among the church fathers together with theologians of the Middle Ages.¹¹

Neither the early church nor the medieval thinkers, however, made the *munus triplex* foundational to their Christology or their theological system. Some emphasized two offices while others only one. None interconnected all three and made them the primary defining characteristics of Christ's mediatorial office.

Throughout church history, Jesus Christ has been regarded as the High Priest of our redemption without whose work we would be hopeless. Similarly, he has always been regarded as the greatest Prophet who reveals God to us and the Eternal King who rules his people and all creation. But, it is through the work of Calvin that the threefold office in all three of its dimensions begins to take on a redemptive, salvific role and becomes the defining characteristic of Christ's mediation. In other words, it is not only as priest that Christ atones for our sins but as prophet and king he accomplishes and applies redemption *pro nobis*. It is Christ the Prophet, Priest, King who actualizes redemption in the face of the human predicament.

Calvin situates his discussion of the threefold office in Book 2 of the *Institutes* which is titled, "Of the knowledge of God the Redeemer, in Christ, as first manifested to the fathers, under the law, and thereafter to us under the gospel." It is important

¹¹ For helpful summaries of the historical development of the use of the triplex, see the following: Brooks L. Fetters, "The Offices of Christ," *Theological Perspectives: Arminian-Wesleyan Reflections on Theology*, ed. Paul R. Fetters (Huntington, Ind.: The Church of the United Brethren in Christ, 1992), 378-95; Max L. Stackhouse, "The Offices of Christ from Early Church Through the Reformers," *Who Do You Say That I Am? : Christology and Identity in the United Church of Christ*. Edited by Scott Paeth. (Cleveland, Oh.: United Church Press, 2006), 25-41; Geoffrey Wainwright, *For Our Salvation: Two Approaches to the Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 99-120.

to recognize that “knowledge” in this instance is not merely information about the revelation of God as Redeemer but is itself salvific. Knowledge is not simply data but transformative intimacy. If the question is posed, “How is God our Redeemer?” the answer is given, “He is our Redeemer through the threefold office of Christ.” Furthermore, *Institutes* 2.15, which is devoted specifically to delineating the threefold office of Christ, Calvin titles, “To Know the Purpose for Which Christ was Sent by the Father, and What He conferred Upon Us, We Must Look Above All at Three Things in Him: The Prophetic Office, Kingship, and Priesthood.” As implied in this title, the threefold office becomes constitutive of the work of Christ and of “*what he conferred on us.*” Both the work done to accomplish our salvation and the nature of our salvation are gleaned from the threefold office.

In his commentary on 1 John 1:5, Calvin explains that “there are two distinct powers which belong to the Son of God.” The first power of the Son is manifested in the order and structure given to all creation. The Son created all things as he is the “Speech” of God and everything continues in existence by his power. The second power of the Son of God is that “by which he renews and restores fallen nature.”¹² This restoration and regeneration of human nature requires that “a new office be undertaken by the Son of God, the office of Mediator.”¹³ It is given to this office to renew fallen mankind “by the Spirit of regeneration.” But what exactly is a mediator in Reformed thought and why is it important to establish that Christ is Mediator in all three of the threefold office?

¹² John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries 17 (n.d.; repr., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005.), 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*

A partial answer to the second of these two questions is found in the argument I made in the first chapter that the human predicament requires royal, prophetic, and priestly resolution. In other words, to provide full, complete reconciliation and redemption to fallen human beings requires a tripartite work. This work takes place through the *munus triplex* in its distinctions as well as in the interrelatedness and inseparability of its three dimensions. Herman Bavinck explained it this way:

However, speaking of Christ's three offices is not for that reason arbitrary, nor is it Oriental imagery that can be abandoned without scruple, nor can the one office be reduced to one of the other two. While it is not possible to separate them, the distinction between them is most certainly there. To be a mediator, to be a complete savior, he had to be appointed by the Father to all three and equipped by the Spirit for all three offices. *The truth is that the idea of humanness already encompasses within itself this threefold dignity and activity. Human beings have a head to know, a heart to give themselves, a hand to govern and to lead; correspondingly, they were in the beginning equipped by God with knowledge and understanding, with righteousness and holiness, with dominion and glory (blessedness). The sin that corrupted human beings infected all their capacities and consisted not only in ignorance, folly, error, lies, blindness, darkness but also in unrighteousness, guilt, moral degradation, and further in misery, death, and ruin. Therefore Christ, both as the Son and as the image of God, for himself and also as our mediator and savior, had to bear all three offices. He had to be a prophet to know and to disclose the truth of God; a priest, to devote himself to God and, in our place, to offer himself up to God; a king, to govern and protect us according to God's will. To teach, to reconcile, and to lead; to instruct, to acquire, and to apply salvation; wisdom, righteousness, and redemption; truth, love, and power—all three are essential to the completeness of our salvation. In Christ's God-to-humanity relation, he is a prophet; in his humanity-to-God relation he is a priest; in his headship over all humanity he is a king...Though a king, he rules not by the sword but by his Word and spirit. He is a prophet, but his word is power and [really] happens. He is a priest but lives by dying, conquers by suffering, and is all-powerful by his love. He is always all these things in conjunction, never the one without the other; mighty in speech and action as a king and full of grace and truth in his royal rule.¹⁴ [emphasis mine]*

¹⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 3:367-8.

For Bavinck, the image of God in human beings includes both the dignity and the activities associated with the threefold office. Thus, as the representative mediator, Christ had to fulfill each of these functions to restore mankind to fellowship with God. The prophetic office addresses the head or mind, teaching and instructing in God's ways and truth. The priestly office both atones for sin and offers up the heart, the emotions, the fullness of the person in devotion to God. The royal office governs and protects.

A couple hundred years before Bavinck, Francis Turretin made a similar observation about the threefold office and the human predicament. While Bavinck takes things back to the garden, recognizing something in the being of humans as created by God that corresponds to the three offices, Turretin sees the three offices answering specifically to mankind as fallen. He writes:

Second, the threefold misery of men introduced by sin—ignorance, guilt and the tyranny and bondage by sin—required this conjunction of a threefold office. *Ignorance is healed by the prophetic*; guilt by the priestly; the tyranny of corruption of sin by the kingly.¹⁵ [emphasis mine]

Sin has brought three troubling conditions upon mankind such that each of the threefold office answers to one of the problematic circumstances. But, Turretin goes a step further in arguing that not only was the threefold office necessary to answer these three conditions, it is also required by the nature of the salvation God gives:

“For three things are altogether required for it—annunciation, acquisition, application—that it might be revealed to us (to whom it is unknown by nature), that

¹⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2:393, topic 14, quest. 5, sec. 8.

it might be acquired for us and applied when acquired.”¹⁶ The prophetic office answers to the need for announcing salvation, the priestly answers to the need for acquiring it, and the kingly to the application of it “through the efficacy of his Spirit.” Thus, both the nature of mankind as created and humanity’s dilemma in the fallen state call for a threefold Mediator.

Mediator in Reformed Thought

As already noted, Calvin speaks of a second “power” of the Son of God that is associated with a “new” office. The Son of God is appointed to the office of Mediator in order to regenerate and to restore human nature. Clearly, the emphasis is placed on mediation as a component of Christ’s work in relation to the *fallen* situation of mankind. Yet, Calvin’s description of the Son’s first power to create all things and sustain their existence leaves no doubt the Son, in some sense, is in a mediating position prior to the fall. In this case, the mediation is not intended to be redemptive but part of the created order. For example, Calvin takes the position that the term *logos* in John 1 ought to be translated not as *Verbum*, the Word, but as *Sermo*, the Speech.¹⁷ His argument for Speech as opposed to Word follows from his assertion that God “reveals himself to us by his *Speech* [emphasis original].”¹⁸ There appears to be a sense of action or activity so that this is not a static “word” but an ongoing speaking. We might liken this to the language of command. A command is a word but it is active and carries authority with it. We even use the term “word” as

¹⁶ Ibid., 14.5.9 (2:393-4)

¹⁷ Calvin, *Comm. on John*, 28.

¹⁸ Ibid., 26.

a substitute in some cases for “command,” e.g., “One word [command] from the judge and the criminal is executed.” Given that Christ is the Word/Speech of God in creation, and is such prior to the existence of sin, there is a sense in which he is a mediator even before the fall.

Furthermore, not only does God reveal himself through the Speech he also gives life through the Speech and the light of understanding. Calvin writes, “In a word, what Paul ascribes to God, that *in him we are, and move, and live*, (Acts xvii. 28,) John declares to be accomplished by the gracious agency of *the Speech*; so that it is God who gives us *life*, but it is by the eternal *Speech*.”¹⁹ Christ the Speech of God is the agent through whom we are brought into existence and given life. As the one who mediates life, the Speech also provides humans with reason and rationality. With reference to John 1:4, Calvin writes, “He speaks here, in my opinion, of that part of *life* in which men excel other animals; and informs us that *the life* which was bestowed on *men* was not of an ordinary description, but was united to *the light* of understanding.”²⁰ The purpose of this rationality, besides indicating the superiority of humans over other creatures, is “that they [humans] might acknowledge Him who is the Author of so excellent a blessing.” In other words, the rationality is to be used to recognize the existence of God and to praise him. It becomes a means through which God is encountered. Thus, the Son of God, who is the Speech, is the source of this life and light and, therefore, can be described as a kind of mediator of God’s gracious self-revelation to humans even prior to the fall. Once again, Calvin does not go so far as to use the term mediator for this “first power” of the Son but, I would

¹⁹ Ibid., 31-2.

²⁰ Ibid., 32.

argue, his understanding of the Son's work prior to the Incarnation can be described with this language. It is important that we recognize that Calvin avoids the language of Mediator prior to the fall and specifically uses it to describe Christ's office after the fall in order to highlight the necessity of an intermediary to reconcile rebellious creatures to their Creator.²¹ Prior to the fall, mediation would be more in the sense of agent or "transmitter" of God's *beneficence* rather than as one who engages in a work that redeems and reconciles.

Ursinus makes a similar point. In response to the question, "whether Adam had need of a Mediator before the fall," he writes, "To this, answer may be returned according to the signification which we attach to the term, Mediator." Ursinus argues, if we understand by Mediator "one through whose mediation, or by whom God bestows his benefits, and communicates himself to us, then Adam, even before his fall, had need of a Mediator."²² The reason Ursinus gives is the fact that Christ was the one through whom the Father created and gave life to all things. As proof of his contention, he quotes from John 1:4, the same passage on which Calvin commented indicating what I call the Son's "mediating" role in creation. A few centuries later, Bavinck makes this explicit: "He is the mediator of both creation and

²¹ This is not always the case, however. On one occasion, Calvin does use the term "mediator" with reference to the pre-fall state. In *Institutes* 2.12.1, he writes, "Even if man had remained free from all stain, his condition would have been too lowly for him to reach God without a Mediator" [John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics XXI, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:465].

²² Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.), 92.

re-creation.”²³ Ursinus is careful, however, to delineate the distinction that mediation prior to the fall was not redemptive. As a matter of fact, he adds, “We must observe, however, that the Scriptures do not speak of Christ, as being Mediator before the fall of man.”²⁴ In other words, the most important sense and meaning of mediation is found only after the fall as the eternal Son becomes the Messiah.

Mediator of the Covenant of Grace

Grace is understood in Reformed thought within the so-called law / gospel contrast. Law represents a principle of works, duty, requirements while gospel represents a principle of mercy and grace. This law / gospel contrast is prominent in Reformed covenant theology. The law principle is inherent and definitive for the so-called covenant of works while the gospel principle is inherent and definitive for the covenant of grace. In both cases, there exists a federal head who acts on behalf of all his people and, as such, can be described as a kind of mediator. Adam represents mankind in the covenant of works while Christ represents his people in the covenant of grace. What this representative does impacts all those who belong to him. This “impact,” especially in the case of Christ, goes far beyond any kind of simple influence. It effects a changed status in relation to God and a moral transformation. Christ’s mediatorial work addresses both the guilt of sin and the pollution of sin. Even Adam’s mediatorial work impacted his descendants by bringing God’s curse upon them and causing them to inherit a fallen nature prone to

²³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:363.

²⁴ Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 92.

sinful rebellion against God. In both Adam's case as well as Christ's, the mediatorial work is tied to the covenant in which each represents his people and is concerned with the relationship between God and those whom the mediators represent.

It is important to recognize, however, that the Reformed tradition does not apply the term "mediator" to Adam. Rather, the preferred language is "public" person or representative or head. Question and answer 22 of the Westminster Larger Catechism reads:

Q. Did all mankind fall in that first transgression?

A. The covenant being made with Adam as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in that first transgression.²⁵

A critical distinction exists between Adam, a representative, public person, and what is said about Christ as the "second Adam."²⁶ The second Adam also is a public, representative person. However, the covenant of grace in which he represents all the elect stands distinct for its free and merciful reconciliation granted by God. So, in the covenant of grace, God's grace is manifested particularly by his provision of a Mediator. The Westminster Larger Catechism states in the answer to Q. 32, "The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by him...." The office of the Mediator is to bring "life and salvation," that is, it is redemptively addressing the fallen condition of mankind. This post-fall, redemptive, salvific understanding of Mediator is also seen in the decision by the Divines to use the term "Redeemer" in

²⁵ Westminster Larger Catechism in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, U.K.: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

²⁶ See Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 31 for "second Adam" language applied to Christ.

the parallel set of questions in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Hence, where the Larger Catechism speaks of the Mediator of the covenant, the Shorter speaks of the Redeemer of God's elect.²⁷ We see both terms brought together in the Heidelberg Catechism Q. 15:

Then, what kind of mediator and redeemer must we seek?

One who is a true and righteous man and yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is at the same time true God.

What are the key characteristics of the work of the Mediator? At its most basic, Christ as Mediator, "not only stands between God and us, but he also intermediates."²⁸ Or, as Ursinus put it, "A mediator, in general, signifies one who reconciles two parties that are at variance, by interposing himself and pacifying the offended party, by entreaty, by satisfaction, and giving security that the like offence will not again be committed."²⁹ In other words, to speak of Christ as Mediator is to bring into view the entire conception of atonement and all that is necessary thereby to reconcile God with his creatures and to return them to his favor. Typically, this atoning work is attributed to or subsumed under the priestly office of Christ since, most often, it is focused on the concepts revolving around satisfaction. Horton remarks, "we often think of the role of a mediator in priestly terms."³⁰ However, the tradition has always made room for the view that incorporates the royal and prophetic offices into the atoning work of Christ. In other words, whatever is

²⁷ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 21 in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, U.K.: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

²⁸ Van Gemeren and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 463.

²⁹ Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 92.

³⁰ Michael S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 209.

required to effect the reconciled and favorable relationship between God and man is part of the atonement broadly construed.

Turretin, for example, divides the mediatorial work into four parts or modes, two of which he argues are attributed to Christ's prophetic office while two are attributed to his priestly and royal offices: "The first and second modes belong to his prophetic office, the third and fourth to his priestly and kingly office."³¹ Later, he states, "This mediatorial office of Christ is distributed into three functions, which are so many parts of it: prophetic, priestly, kingly."³² Ursinus sees both the name "Jesus" and the title "Christ" as titles designating the mediatorial office of Christ. However, he argues, even though "the name Jesus denotes the office of the mediator in a general way, that of Christ expresses it more fully and distinctly; for the name Christ expresses the three parts of his office, viz.: prophetic, sacerdotal, and regal."³³ Clearly, the mediatorial work of Christ encompasses all three offices in Reformed thought.

Why is it important to establish that the Mediatorial work encompasses all three offices? As stated earlier, it is common and easy to assume that true mediation involves primarily Christ's priestly office. Since the focus in mediation is reconciliation, the priestly role of intercession and sacrificial, atoning sacrifice is most readily associated with accomplishing the necessities for reconciliation to take place. What I hope to show below is how the prophetic office is critical to mediation because, without it, neither knowledge of God's grace nor new creation can take

³¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 14.1.5 (2:376).

³² Turretin, *Institutes* 14.5.5 (2:392).

³³ Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 170.

place. Before engaging that question, a further important point needs to be made about categories of mediation.

Categories of Mediation

I hope to demonstrate below how the pastoral office mediates the prophetic grace of God in Christ. In applying the language of mediation to office in the church, an immediate concern would be raised by Reformed orthodoxy, namely that such an approach betrays the belief that there is only one Mediator between God and humans, the man Christ Jesus (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5). This point is repeatedly made in the confessions and catechisms of the Reformed tradition. For example, chapter five of the Second Helvetic Confession is titled, “Of the Adoration, Worship, and Invocation of God through the Only Mediator Jesus Christ.” The polemical bent of chapter five stands against the invocation of and prayers to saints. Hence, the Confession states, “In all crises and trials of our life we call upon him [God] alone, and that by the mediation of our only mediator and intercessor, Jesus Christ.” Note the emphasis on *only mediator and intercessor*. Similar language is used in the answer to Q. 36 of the Westminster Larger Catechism which speaks of “the only Mediator of the covenant of grace.” Examples can be multiplied.

With such a strong emphasis on Christ alone as Mediator who gives access to God, does the Reformed tradition leave any role open to mediation through ordained church offices? The answer is yes when a careful distinction is made between two kinds, types, or categories of mediation. Ursinus puts it this way, “All these things [mediatorial acts and concomitant blessings] Christ does, obtains, and perfects, not only by his merits, but also by his efficacy. He is, therefore, said to be a

Mediator, both in merit and efficacy; because he does not only by his sacrifice merit for us but he also, by virtue of his Spirit, effectually confers upon us his benefits which consist in righteousness, and eternal life, according to what is said....”³⁴

The first category of mediation is that of merit. Merit brings into view the entirety of the work of Christ by which he, outside of us, accomplishes our salvation. In other words, the emphasis falls on the fact that Christ is the only one who can fulfill all God’s requirements both to make satisfaction for sin and to be deemed perfectly righteous. To put it in Reformed covenantal terms, Christ alone fulfills the stipulations of the covenant of works, bears the covenant sanctions for the breach of covenant of his people, and on this basis merits the reward from God the Father. Christ’s fulfillment of the covenant of works is foundational to his role as Mediator of the covenant of grace, in other words, to his role as the one who merits the forgiveness and righteousness freely given to his people.

This unique work of Christ is objectively accomplished *extra nos*. The work by which Christ merits redemption for us lies outside of us as individuals. It is historic fact “out there.” For this reason, all our own work or accomplishment or that of others is precluded from being regarded as mediatory. The concept is that Christ has done it all leaving no room for human merit or for any other mediator. This is why Christ’s atoning work is commonly referred to as redemption accomplished in Reformed thought and is related to his state of humiliation, that is, to the work of Christ during his ministry on earth. Turretin speaks of the acts of Christ as Mediator as “distinguished into impetratory (by which that reconciliation

³⁴ Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 94.

was acquired and which depend upon it) and applicatory and conservatory (by which all of them are applied and conserved).”³⁵ The Westminster Larger Catechism divides the two parts by speaking of the benefits *procured by Christ* through his mediation and the way in which *we are made partakers* of those benefits:

Q. 57. What benefits hath Christ procured by his mediation?

A. Christ, by his mediation, hath procured redemption, with all other benefits of the covenant of grace.

Q. 58. How do we come to be made partakers of the benefits which Christ hath procured?

A. We are made partakers of the benefits which Christ hath procured, by the application of them unto us, which is the work especially of God the Holy Ghost.

This procurement is the mediation of merit and so the work of Christ alone. The reference to being made partakers of Christ’s benefits brings into view the second category of mediation, the mediation of efficacy.

This second mediatorial category, the mediation of efficacy, is no less the work of Christ than the first. Not only does Christ acquire the benefits of redemption for us, he also communicates those benefits to us. This is a perspective clearly articulated, for example, in Westminster Larger Catechism Q.’s 153 and 154:

Q. 153. What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us by reason of the transgression of the law?

A. That we may escape the wrath and curse of God due to us by reason of the transgression of the law, he requireth of us repentance toward God, and faith

³⁵ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.1.6 (2:376). For additional works detailing the distinction between redemption accomplished and applied, see John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955); Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 415.

toward our Lord Jesus Christ, and the diligent use of *the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation.*

Q. 154. What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation?

A. *The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation. [emphasis mine]*

Christ, as Mediator, both merits redemption for his people and efficaciously communicates that redemption to them. This mediation of efficacy is inseparable from the work of the Holy Spirit as we saw above in Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 58 which indicates that the application of the benefits of redemption is particularly the work of the Spirit. Nevertheless, Son and Spirit both are engaged in the application.

It should also be pointed out that the means by which Christ communicates the benefits of his mediation are the outward means of word, sacraments, and prayer. I will return to this point below when discussing the pastoral office in the church. For now, it should be noted that the word as an outward means includes both the word read aloud to a congregation as well as preached by ordained ministers.³⁶ Hence, Christ communicates or mediates the benefits of his meritorious mediation by using ordained officers to do so. Nevertheless, both Christ and the Spirit stand behind all these efforts so that the true efficacy and power remain in God—Christ is the one who communicates the benefits. In a way, the mediation of efficacy is akin to Christ's mediation of God's beneficence in the acts of creation. Christ the word mediates the goodness and power of God to bring creation into

³⁶ Cf. Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 155 and Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 89.

existence. In doing so, he is not accomplishing meritorious deeds but transmitting as agent the goodness God intends.

Prophetic Mediation

As mentioned above, Turretin divides the work of the Mediator into four parts attributing the first two to the prophetic office. The first work of the Mediator is his service as internuncius, “the interpreter of each party, as Moses is called a mediator in the Old Testament because he stood between God and the people, Dt. 5:5.”³⁷ Christ is internuncius “by reason of his doctrine inasmuch as he was the interpreter of both parties and especially inasmuch as he declared the will of God to men.”³⁸ Given the prophetic charge to deliver the word of God, there is a clear relationship, as Turretin points out, between Christ’s prophetic office and his Mediatorial service as internuncius.

Turretin’s second mode of mediatorial work he calls the work of “arbiter.” He describes an arbiter as one “who is selected by the litigants and has power over the whole affair to settle it, not by strict justice, but equitability (*kat’ epieikeian*).”³⁹ Clearly, since Christ “tempered justice with grace and mercy” in procuring reconciliation for us with God, he is acting in this capacity. It’s unclear to me, and Turretin doesn’t offer further explanation, how the role of arbiter falls to the prophetic work of Christ. Generally, it seems to me, arbitration is a royal function because of its judicial nature. Only one acting in the role of judge can temper justice

³⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, 14.1.4 (2:375).

³⁸ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.1.5 (2:376).

³⁹ *Ibid*, 14.1.4 (2:375).

with mercy. Nevertheless, Turretin attributes the role of arbiter to the prophetic office.

The third mode by which Christ is Mediator is as “intercessor and advocate” entreating and interceding “for one party with the other.” And, the fourth mode Turretin renders as “surety and satisfier.” The surety and satisfier “conciliates the discordant by making satisfaction to the offended party and going security for the future fidelity and obedience of the offending party, so that no cause of disagreement may afterwards arise between them.”⁴⁰ Turretin regards these two mediatory modes as the work of Christ as priest and king.

Thus far, I have highlighted the distinction between a mediation of merit and a mediation of efficacy. Given the nature of prophetic service, focused as it is on word-ministry, the prophetic office of Christ logically falls in the category of efficacious mediation. This is readily obvious in the breadth of Reformed thought and comment on the prophetic office. Although there may be a number of ways to classify the Reformed descriptions of this office, I will argue for a classification of three categories: annunciation, instruction, and revelation. Christ the prophet announces the gospel (kerygmatic proclamation), instructs in the ways of God, and reveals God. The third category, revelation, is not the mere “making known” of that which was heretofore unknown nor the mere showcasing of God but the apocalyptic, transforming presence of God made manifest. It is crucial, however, not to separate these three from one another because, for example, the act of proclaiming the gospel is itself a revelation of God and the manifestation of his

⁴⁰ Ibid, 14.1.4 (2:375-6).

presence. As the evidence for each of these three categories is summarized, they should not be radically separated from one another but viewed as an intertwined whole. Nevertheless, the distinctions are useful for clarifying the range of Christ's prophetic work. After discussing the dimensions of Christ's prophetic office I hope to show how Christ continues in the efficacious mediation of grace through the pastoral office of the church.

Prophet as Annunciator or Proclaimer

The first category of prophetic service in Christ's office is that of announcing or proclaiming the gospel. Turretin regards this as the principal part of the prophetic office: "Another part of the prophetic office (and indeed the principal) is the preaching of the gospel or the annunciation of the grace brought in by Christ."⁴¹ The gospel, Turretin tells us, is referred to as "the doctrine of Christ" (Acts 13:12) or "the testimony of Christ" (1 Cor. 1:6; Rev. 1:2) because Christ is not only the object of the doctrine of the gospel but "he is its principal cause and primary author."⁴² In all its fullness, the gospel comes from, belongs to, and is centered on Jesus Christ. By "gospel," Turretin understands not just any promise of grace but specifically "the completed gospel, which contains the manifestation of Christ in the flesh." Christ's prophetic work, therefore, entails the proclamation of this knowledge about himself.

Edmondson points out a similar line of thought in Calvin's work that demonstrates how Christ's prophetic office entails gospel annunciation and

⁴¹ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.8.10 (2:399)

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.8.10 (2:399)

proclamation. He argues that, in comparison to Christ the prophet as one who “explains and enlivens the law for his disciples...leading the Church more deeply into the doctrine of life...*the more significant aspect of Christ's teaching office is his testimony to that covenant of grace that he fulfills through his work as priest and as Head of the Church.*”⁴³ Christ’s prophetic work includes bearing witness to the redemptive work he fulfills in his priestly and royal functions. According to Edmondson, Calvin especially sees Christ’s teaching role emphasized in the Gospel of John because, in that Gospel, Jesus teaches “specifically about his office toward us, that in him God manifests God’s love and God’s power to save.” He directs attention to a comment Calvin makes in the argument section of his commentary saying, “Yet there is also this difference between them [the Gospel of John and Synoptics], that the other three are more copious in their narrative of the life and death of Christ, but John dwells more largely on the doctrine by which the office of Christ, together with the power of his death and resurrection, is unfolded.”⁴⁴ As Edmondson further explains, Christ’s activity of teaching the gospel is important in Calvin’s view because “through it we come to enjoy the benefits that Christ would bestow upon us in his role as priest and Head.”⁴⁵ It is through Christ’s teaching that “we gain access to the salvation he won for us in his death and resurrection.”

This gospel-focused instruction of Christ is just as necessary to our salvation as the accomplishment of salvation in Christ’s priestly work. If it were not made known to us, we would have no access to it nor could we benefit from it. Calvin

⁴³ Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology*, 156. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Commentary On John*, 21.

⁴⁵ Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology*, 156-7.

explains, “But as bare history would not be enough, and, indeed, would be of no advantage for salvation, the Evangelists do not merely relate that Christ was born, and that he died and vanquished death, but also explain for what purpose he was born, and died, and rose again, and what benefit we derive from those events.”⁴⁶

Summarizing Calvin’s thought, Edmondson writes,

We need knowledge of the Gospel, Calvin tells us. We must understand whereby we are delivered so that we can place our faith in this deliverance. The Gospel must not only be enacted by Christ, but must also be taught by him so that we can know to entrust ourselves to him.⁴⁷

Thus, Calvin describes Christ’s prophetic office as being a herald and witness of grace. This is the summary of Calvin’s interpretation of Is 61:1-2 applied to Christ. Isaiah uses the language of preaching and proclamation to describe the nature and purpose of the anointing. On that basis, Calvin concludes, “We see that he [Christ] was anointed by the Spirit to be herald and witness of the Father’s grace.”⁴⁸ Christ both announces the grace and testifies to it as he is the essence and fulfillment of that grace. Sherman, following a similar line of thought, puts it this way, “In other words, as God’s messianic prophet Christ does not simply announce a message, he *initiates* what the message announces; he does not simply deliver a message, he *is* the message.”⁴⁹ This is to recognize that Jesus, like the prophets of old, spoke of God’s grace. But, unlike the prophets before him, he was not a mere prophet but the fulfillment of the promised grace.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Commentary On John*, 21.

⁴⁷ Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology*, 157.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.15.2 (1:496).

⁴⁹ Robert Sherman, *King, Priest, and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of Atonement, Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 225.

Sherman also emphasizes from another angle how Christ is a prophet but more than a prophet proclaiming the good news. Drawing on the passage in Luke 4 in which Jesus announces that the prophecy he has just read from Isaiah has been fulfilled that day in the presence of those listening to him, Sherman argues that “Jesus becomes both the prophet and the prophecy, both the messenger and the message.” But, this is to argue that the words and deeds of Christ are not separable from his person.⁵⁰ Jesus is not offering some kind of truth that stands on its own, a truth that could have been delivered by anyone else. Sherman writes:

Nowhere in the Gospels, or elsewhere in the New Testament, are Jesus’ words and deeds presented as somehow standing on their own, as offering a truth or blessing that could have just as well been delivered anonymously or by someone else. Jesus’ proclamation and enactment of God’s in-breaking reign are inseparably bound up with his person, for he is not just an ordinary prophetic spokesman of God, a merely human conduit for the speaking of God’s Spirit. Rather, he is the messianic embodiment of God’s Word, the one conceived of the Holy Spirit, the one upon whom the Spirit rests, the one commissioned by the Spirit who in turn commissions the Spirit to enact his teaching. The truth of God’s reign is not an abstract, but a living and personal truth, one that cannot stand on its own, but is revealed by and in Jesus, the messianic prophet—a distinction that has crucial implications for how that truth is to be received. Were God’s truth abstract, an impersonal object, then presumably it could be received abstractly and objectively. But God’s truth is embodied in a person, and thus must be received personally and subjectively. Indeed, it must be communicated in order to be received, in the form of personal address—and this Christ does, through the instrumentality of the Spirit.⁵¹

Christ is the manifestation of the grace heralded by the prophets. As Chief Prophet, Christ himself also communicates himself. He engages in personal address. He announces and proclaims the gospel which “must be communicated in order to be received.”

⁵⁰ Sherman, *King, Priest, Prophet*, 234.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 234-5.

The work of Christ, in common with the prophets before him, can be summarized as acting as the mouthpiece of God. This “mouthpiece” work as a proclamation or annunciation work includes the confrontation of the people with God’s claims upon them. Letham: “The main task of the prophet was to act as the mouthpiece of Yahweh. He confronted his contemporaries with Yahweh’s just claims upon them, calling them to be faithful to the covenant (Lk. 4:18-21; Jn. 14:5-11; 15:15). Jesus did just that...and more.”⁵² Sherman concurs with Letham’s description of the prophet as mouthpiece of God and describes the “mouthpiece” work as revealing the divine will as well as functioning “as the means by which God summoned the people back to his will when they had strayed from its requirements.”⁵³ The summons to return to God, though confrontational and often condemnatory of the straying from God, was intended for the people’s good since Israel’s “continued existence depended upon its ongoing and proper relation to him [God].” Thus, arguably, even the proclamation of condemnation was gracious since it was intended to drive the people back to the true source of blessing. In this regard, we might also describe the prophets and Christ himself as the conscience of his people, that pressing voice crying out and calling for a wholehearted return and clinging to God alone.⁵⁴ “The prophet became a teacher and advocate of God’s will

⁵² Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1993), 21.

⁵³ Sherman, *King, Priest, Prophet*, 229

⁵⁴ Sherman: “In their role as the mouthpiece of God, the prophets served more particularly as teachers, counselors, and advocates—in a word, as Israel’s conscience” (*King, Priest, Prophet*, 229).

with regard to true worship and right behavior—and in the process, the people’s own truest fulfillment.”⁵⁵

The annunciation work of Christ as prophet, therefore, can be distinguished from the prophetic work of teaching and revealing in that annunciation is the authoritative, kerygmatic proclamation of the gospel message. It is confrontational as it calls for a response from those to whom it is made. Though it is inseparable from teaching / instruction as well as from being revelatory, it stands distinct.

Prophet as Instructor or Teacher

Perhaps a helpful way to distinguish the teaching work from that of the annunciatory is by analogy with the distinction between preaching and lecturing. In Reformed churches, generally speaking, when the pastor ascends the pulpit, he is expected not only to give instruction from the word of God but instruction in such fashion that the listeners’ hearts are moved and their minds persuaded of the truths being taught and proclaimed. Certainly this is not less than teaching but it is at the same time more. In contrast, a Reformed minister appointed to teach, for example, in a theological college, will desire to persuade and convince his students of the truths he is teaching. However, his focus is on helping them learn and understand the details of the doctrines without the rhetorical work of persuasion. Nevertheless, both the work of proclamation and instruction are closely connected.

Instruction is sometimes construed as revelation. In other words, the doctrines that are taught are necessary in order to know and understand God and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 229.

his will. But, if these are not revealed, that is, made known through instruction, they cannot be understood. For example, this is the tack taken by Turretin when he explains his reasoning for the necessity of Christ's prophetic office:

The necessity of this office appears from three things. (1) From the necessity of a revelation because there can be no knowledge of God and divine things without a revelation, for the natural man does not receive the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14) and no saving revelation is given except through Christ (Jn. 1:18; Mt. 11:27). Nor could reason or the law disclose to us the mystery of piety, but Christ alone in the gospel. (2) From the method of salvation because no means of salvation was given except faith: "Faith however cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). (3) From the oracles of the Old Testament which promise that prophecy, which must necessarily be fulfilled.⁵⁶

Both reasons (1) and (2) are arguments for the necessity of Christ's prophetic office based on the necessity for revealed knowledge. In other words, there is truth from God that must be known in order that we can know God and the things of God. But, for us to know these things requires that God make them known to us. And this, though associated with proclamation, goes beyond announcing the truths to explaining, describing, and giving instruction in them.

A few paragraphs later, in further explaining the prophetic office, Turretin argues that the doctrine preached by Christ as prophet includes the exposition of the law. This exposition consists both of explaining the law as well as inculcating it for multiple purposes. The instruction and inculcation is intended to convict humans of their sinful weakness so that they "fly the more eagerly on that account to Christ," as well as, to vindicate the law from "the false interpretations and glosses of the Pharisees" and thereby to restore God's intended meaning. Furthermore, this instruction and inculcation was to produce a "spiritual and inner obedience of the

⁵⁶ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.7.3 (2:397-8).

heart” since the law is spiritual so that righteousness would not be merely external. The instruction was also teaching the subordination of the ceremonial law to the moral and it rejected “the traditions of the elders as useless and offensive to God.”⁵⁷ Edmondson argues for a similar perspective in Calvin’s thought in which Christ the Prophet is the interpreter of the law. According to Edmondson, Calvin understood the Old Testament prophets to be “interpreters of the Law who explained God’s promises and clarified God’s commands.”⁵⁸ Christ explicated and explained the “doctrine of life,” which, Edmondson tells us, “Calvin characterizes quite simply as his explanation and clarification of the Law given by Moses.”⁵⁹ It ought to be clear that these are the functions of a teacher who does not so much proclaim as carefully exposit the truth as well as correct those in error.

Another way to describe the teaching dimension of Christ’s prophetic office is as “teacher of wisdom.” Calvin puts it this way, “And the prophetic dignity in Christ leads us to know that in the sum of doctrine as he has given it to us all parts of perfect wisdom are contained.”⁶⁰ Sherman makes a similar point when he notes that the Gospel of John frequently describes Christ “as the one who enlightens the world.”⁶¹ Although Sherman doesn’t make this point, enlightenment is more than having knowledge. It is seeing in ways not seen before, perceiving depths previously unknown, as well as correcting wrong understandings. Sherman’s further observation about one of the ways the Gospel of John presents Christ as a

⁵⁷ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.7.6 (2:398-9).

⁵⁸ Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology*, 66.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.15.2 (1:496).

⁶¹ Sherman, *King, Priest, Prophet*, 226.

prophet also supports Christ as the teacher who gives wisdom. Sherman writes, “As it was in the Synoptic Gospels, so, too, is it here: Jesus presents his disciples with a new reality, which is to say, a new way of understanding the world and a new way of being in the world, based on God’s truth and intentions and not the world’s own mistaken self-understanding.”⁶² It takes the insight of wisdom to see and understand God, the world, and oneself rightly. Christ as teaching prophet provides this wisdom.

The Reformed confessional witness especially is concerned with Christ the Prophet as a teacher. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism Q. 31 explains that Christ is called “Christ” because he is “ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief Prophet and Teacher.” Prophetic service is equated with pedagogical work. The content of the instruction is the full revelation of “the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption.” The Westminster Larger Catechism presents a similar perspective in Q. 43:

Q. 43. How doth Christ execute the office of a prophet?

A. Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in his revealing to the church, in all ages, by his Spirit and word, in divers ways of administration, the whole will of God, in all things concerning their edification and salvation.

Christ’s teaching work is revelatory, making known what is not known. However, this revelation is accomplished by means of the Spirit and word for purposes of edification and salvation, that is, both to bring people into a redemptive relationship with God (salvation) and to guide, instruct, and build them in that relationship (edification). We can associate entry into the redemptive relationship with the

⁶² Ibid., 227.

proclamation work of the prophetic office while growth in understanding redemption, an aspect of edification, belongs more fully within the instructional aspects of the prophetic work.

Prophet as Apocalyptic Revelation

I've already intimated that the medium is the message in the section on Christ the Prophet as Proclaimer. In other words, Christ's prophetic proclamation authoritatively announces the message from the Father. But, the one announcing that message, Jesus Christ, is also the content and fulfillment of the message. He carries in his person the manifestation of the gospel grace of God for though a prophet, Christ is more than a prophet. As Robert Letham puts it, "Jesus transcends prophetism, however, for he himself is the truth to which the prophets bore witness. He is greater than a prophet, for he is the Son of God incarnate 'for us...and our salvation'."⁶³ Christ as fulfillment of the message provides a useful entry into the discussion of Christ the Prophet as Apocalyptic Revelation for, to speak of apocalypse, is not to speak simply of revelation of knowledge or information but to speak of the very real "breaking in" of the reign of God such that the apocalyptic word is the creative or re-creative word. As Isaiah tells us,

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,

⁶³ Letham, *Work of Christ*, 94.

and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
(Is 55:10-11 ESV)

This re-creative word of grace is made manifest climactically in the person of Jesus Christ as the Word of God who is also Prophet of the word.

Nancy Duff draws attention to the apocalyptic aspect of Christ's prophetic office by defining the office "as the apocalypse (revelation) of God's act of reconciliation."⁶⁴ Barth, according to Duff, "declares that while God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ has its material content in Christ's priestly and royal offices, this act of reconciliation has a 'distinct character' that is expressed in the prophetic office; 'it declares itself as reality.' As God's act of reconciliation takes place, 'it also expresses, discloses, mediates and reveals itself.'"⁶⁵ For this reason, the term "apocalypse" is most appropriate in describing Christ's prophetic office since the term "carries with it a distinct understanding of revelation as an event that brings into existence what was not there before."⁶⁶ Christ's prophetic service must be viewed "not as the imparting of knowledge but as an apocalyptic event" in order to avoid the church's historic tendency "to reduce the prophetic office to Christ's teaching and example."⁶⁷ There is a transformative reality in the prophetic work so that where the prophet goes real change is taking place.

While agreeing with the general perspective of Duff's argument, Horton takes this line of thought a step further to argue that Christ's prophetic work is part of the reconciliation itself. He agrees that the apocalyptic dimension of Christ's prophetic

⁶⁴ Nancy J. Duff, "Atonement and the Christian Life: Reformed Doctrine from a Feminist Perspective," *Interpretation* 53, no. 1 (1999): 26.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

office brings about what it proclaims. He sets it in eschatological perspective when he explains, “a prophet is not simply a conduit of divine information but a herald of the age to come. Indeed, the prophet mediates the age to come in this present age.”⁶⁸ The apocalyptic-prophetic work of Christ is the eschaton brought into the present age, it is the in-breaking of God’s eschatological reign. Speaking of the prophets in general, Horton says, “Their prophetic ministry is apocalyptic. Their word, as God’s word, *brings about* what it threatens and promises.”⁶⁹ Elsewhere, he puts it this way, “Prophets are teachers (see, for example, Isaiah 30:18-26), but they are also lawyers and ambassadors carrying out the heavenly policy of which they speak.”⁷⁰ The reconciliatory aspect of the prophetic work of Christ is the outcome of Christ as fulfiller of the Father’s decree, “ushering into the present the Spirit’s ‘future.’”⁷¹ Horton argues that this reality, therefore, correlates, when thinking in terms of atonement, not with an exemplarist or moral influence approach but with the active obedience of Christ in fulfilling the covenant of works.

Given that the work of prophets in general and Christ the Prophet in particular is inseparable from their speaking the word of God, this spoken, creative word ought to be viewed in connection with the concept of the church as *creatura verbi*. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, one of the marks of a true church according to Reformed thought is the faithful preaching of the gospel which is often further described in terms of orthodoxy since a false word, not being truth, could

⁶⁸ Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 210.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁷⁰ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 484.

⁷¹ Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 218.

not accomplish the work of the gospel. In any case, the very existence of the church is predicated upon the work of the word of God. When God speaks, things happen. When God speaks, worlds and assemblies are created. Christ the Prophet spoke and the world came into existence. Christ's prophets spoke and kingdoms and nations rose and fell because God was present in the speaking of the prophetic word. "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12 ESV) and God is the one "who gives life to the dead and *calls* into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17 ESV; emphasis mine).

"The prophet," according to Sherman, "became a teacher and advocate of God's will with regard to true worship and right behavior—and in the process, the people's own truest fulfillment."⁷² Christ as prophet is beyond the "truest fulfillment" in that he is the perfect redemptive fulfillment of what God created humans to be. This is another way of arguing that Christ the prophet fulfills the covenant of works because the fulfillment of the covenant of works is nothing less than being perfectly what God desires of creatures made in his image. Since the covenant of works promises reward if fully and perfectly kept, it is part of the reconciliatory process between God and humans. So, for Horton, it is Christ the prophet who fulfills this covenant for us:

He is therefore not only our vicarious sacrifice in his priestly office, but in his prophetic office as well. The one who announces the covenant curses in the Gospels obeys the law in our place and bears them for us. He speaks both for

⁷² Sherman, *King, Priest, Prophet*, 230.

God and for us, answering God's command (which is his own) representatively with a life consonant with our reply, "Here I am."⁷³

But the fact that Christ is the one who, as The Prophet, fulfills the covenant of works is another way of saying that the messenger is the message, that Christ in his person is the reconciliatory act and gift from the Father. Where he is made present, where he is at work, there the efficacious grace of God is present and operative.

Christ's Continuing Prophetic Work in the Ministry of Pastors

I have made and alluded to the point, more than once, that Christ's prophetic office encompasses both his state of humiliation and his state of exaltation. The Westminster Larger Catechism explains that Christ "executeth the office of a prophet, in his revealing to the church, *in all ages*...the whole will of God, in all things concerning their edification and salvation [emphasis mine]."⁷⁴ The question is, where and how do we see, observe, or encounter this ongoing "in all ages" ministry of Christ our prophet? The answer is threefold with two of the three feeding into and undergirding the third: the work of the Holy Spirit, the word of God, and the pastoral ministry. The full text of the Westminster Larger Catechism referenced earlier in this paragraph adds that Christ reveals the whole will of God in all ages, "by his Spirit and word." The Spirit remains the empowerer and author of the word of Scripture while pastors are those gifted, called, and therefore set apart for the work of proclaiming and teaching the word of the Spirit found in Scripture.

⁷³ Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 218.

⁷⁴ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 43.

Turretin and Ursinus both describe Christ's teaching work as a prophet as involving both an external and an internal element. Christ is our teacher as he, while on earth, literally spoke and taught. Yet, he is also our teacher in all ages as he teaches the will and ways of God through his servants the prophets and now through pastors. Turretin calls this "the twofold mode of teaching." In other words, Christ taught immediately himself "in the days of his flesh" and both in the ages before his incarnation and in the present day Christ teaches mediately "by his ministers." Christ taught by his ministers the prophets in the OT era and, after his advent, he teaches "by apostles and pastors—the former extraordinarily called and inspired with the gift of infallibility for a time; the latter called by the ordinary ministry of men, endowed only with common inspiration (even unto the end of the world)."⁷⁵ All of these modes, whether the preaching of Christ himself during his time on earth or the preaching before and after his advent by his servants, are external. They come to the church and others not directly in their core, hearts, or what we might call the center of control of their lives but it comes to the "ears of the body."⁷⁶

At the same time, whether speaking of the "external" ministry of Christ himself while on earth or that of his appointees, Turretin and Ursinus both also speak of Christ's prophetic work as "internal." Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Christ teaches and transforms the hearts of people. For Turretin, this explains the expression in John 6:63 that the words of Christ are "spirit and life," that is, that the word Christ speaks has an "unconquerable efficacy which it exerts in

⁷⁵ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.7.12 (2:400).

⁷⁶ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.7.12 (2:400).

the conversion of the heart.” This is “the privilege of the new covenant” in which God writes his laws upon the heart. Ursinus draws the Spirit into his explanation of this internal aspect of the prophetic ministry when he writes, “he [Christ] should be efficacious through his ministry, in the hearts of those that hear, to teach them internally by his Spirit, to illuminate their minds, and move their hearts to faith and obedience by the gospel.”⁷⁷ According to Ursinus, part of Christ’s prophetic office includes “To institute and preserve the ministry of the gospel; to raise up and send forth prophets, apostles, teachers, and other ministers of the church; to confer on them the gift of prophecy, and furnish them with the gifts necessary to their calling.”⁷⁸ Even as he uses this “external” ministry, he teaches “effectually through the ministry” but this efficacy is based on the fact that the Spirit is involved: “Christ preaches effectually through his own external ministry, and that of those whom, he calls into his service, by virtue of the Holy Spirit operating upon the hearts of men: other prophets are the instruments which Christ employs, and are co-workers together with him.”⁷⁹

The necessity of the Holy Spirit’s work in all ministry is a line of thought codified in the Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 155:

Q. 155. How is the word made effectual to salvation?

A. The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; or building them

⁷⁷ Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 173.

⁷⁸ Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 173.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.

God uses both reading and preaching of the word, God's revelation given in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments,⁸⁰ to draw people to Christ and to cause them to grow and develop in the faith. He uses the human instrument to read and to preach but the effectiveness of any reading or preaching of the word resides in the invisible ministry of the Holy Spirit. This ministry of the Spirit is at the same time the ministry of Christ since he is the one using outward means to communicate the benefits of his mediation:

Q. 154. What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation?

A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation.⁸¹

Sherman reminds us that Christ himself, as prophet, "exercises this function at the prompting and with the power of the Holy Spirit." The Spirit, however, has not ceased to work; he is still active. "Simply put," Sherman argues, "one cannot follow the teachings of Jesus unless the power of the Spirit enables it."⁸² In the same way, unless the Spirit stands behind and empowers the means of grace, they will not be effective.

When speaking of the prophetic office, the primary means of grace in view is, without doubt, the word. And this word as a ministry of reading it publicly and preaching it is given to the ordained office of pastor. Westminster Larger Catechism

⁸⁰ See Westminster Confession of Faith 1.

⁸¹ Westminster Larger Catechism.

⁸² Sherman, *King, Priest, Prophet*, 237.

Q. 156 makes plain that all people are “bound to read” the word in private themselves and with their families. Nevertheless, in the public assembly, “all are not to be permitted to read the Word publicly to the congregation.” This work is reserved to the pastoral office as is the work of preaching. The Directory for Worship written and approved by the Westminster Assembly says, “Reading of the word in the congregation, being part of the publick worship of God, (wherein we acknowledge our dependence upon him, and subjection to him,) and one mean sanctified by him for the edifying of his people, is to be performed by the pastors and teachers.”⁸³ And the Westminster Larger Catechism indicates that only those “duly approved and called to that office” are to preach the word. Exception was made for those training for the ministry provided they had the approval of the presbytery. Since the time the Directory was written in the 1640’s, changes have entered into Reformed practice allowing for others to read Scripture publicly as well. However, the tradition has held all along that it is the particular prerogative of the ordained ministry to do this public reading as well as the authoritative preaching.

The authoritative teaching and preaching of ordained office are not, however, to be viewed as independent of Christ. Even as their efficacy is grounded in the work of the Spirit, so their use constitutes the presence of Christ in the Church today. Edmondson draws attention to this line of thought in Calvin. He writes, “Calvin underlines this significance of the prophetic office of Christ when he

⁸³ *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God (1645) in Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 375.

emphasizes its continuance in the teaching office of the Church.”⁸⁴ This continuance takes the form of “imitating,” so to speak, the prophetic work of Christ. It includes expositing the gospel and interpreting the law and, in this way, “persistently place[ing] God’s grace in Christ before the eyes of the faithful and call[ing] them to live their lives in response to this grace in obedience to God.”⁸⁵ Both this proclamation and exposition of the gospel and the interpretation of the law are aspects of the prophetic work of Christ delineated above. The fact that pastors are called to engage in the same kind of word-ministry as was Christ supports the Reformed contention that Christ continues his prophetic office through the ordained pastoral ministry. Edmondson adds this about Calvin’s view: “Through the continuance of Christ’s prophetic office, Christ maintains a lively presence in the Church.” Not only does Christ maintain this presence, the work of preaching is designed to make him present. In relation to Calvin’s understanding of preaching, Dawn DeVries notes, “Christ’s own office of proclaiming the name of God and of filling all things is fulfilled through the ministry. Thus the preached Word not only conveys Christ, but continues Christ’s living presence in the world.”⁸⁶ Davis makes the point that Calvin understood preaching as God’s means of spanning time and

⁸⁴ Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology*, 167.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁸⁶ Dawn DeVries, “The Incarnation and the Sacramental Word: Calvin’s and Schleiermacher’s Sermons on Luke 2,” *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed. David Willis-Watkins and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 392.

space “to bring Christian, Christ, and cross together.” Preaching links the “work of the cross and the grace of God experienced in the present.”⁸⁷

Conclusion

Office in and for the church is a public, recognized work assigned by God to those whom he calls to it. Office indicates responsibility and service to be rendered. In the case of Christ, he fulfills the Office of Mediator—an office that involves salvific and reconciliatory action on his part under the rubric of the threefold office (*munus triplex*) of prophet, priest, and king. No less than the priestly, the prophetic office is mediatorial and redemptive especially as it engages in authoritative proclamation of the Divine message of redemption, gives regular instruction in it as teacher, and apocalyptically effects the creation of the church as *creatura verbi*. Jesus Christ the Prophet is the one who alone effects all the foregoing in a meritorious and unique sense but he uses his servants, whether the prophets in the past or pastors today, to mediate his meritorious work to his people—this is mediation in the sense of efficacy.

One of the marks of a true church discussed in chapter 2 is the proper preaching of the gospel and word of Christ. This proper preaching is inseparable from those who are called and set apart within the church to engage in the ministry of the word. Reformed thought assigns the ministry of the word to the office of pastor whose central work is the preaching and teaching of the gospel and of all that

⁸⁷ Thomas J. Davis, *This is My Body: The Presence of Christ in Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic), 99-100.

God reveals in Scripture. First and foremost, however, it is Christ himself who is the chief Prophet and Teacher who continues today to fulfill the prophetic ministry of his threefold office. His ministry is made manifest through his servants, the pastors, whose preaching also makes Christ himself present to his people.

This prophetic work of Christ is always accompanied by his priestly and royal work both of which he also continues to manifest through church office. We turn in the next chapter to a consideration of Christ's priestly office and its relation to the church office of pastor. The chapter following will give attention to Christ's royal office and its manifestation not only in the pastoral office but also that of ruling elders and deacons.

CHAPTER 3

CHRIST THE PRIEST:
MEDIATION THROUGH WORD, SACRAMENT, AND INTERCESSION

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, Reformed thought lives within a dialectical tension between the work that only God himself can do and the reality that God does, however, use human instruments as means through which he accomplishes aspects of his work. The church is the locus and instrument of grace but the actual power of that grace remains in the Holy Spirit. Christ is made present really and truly in the preaching of his word through ordained ministers yet it is still really and truly only Christ the Prophet who is ministering his grace to his people through his servants. Pastors have no inherent power. Moving on in the present chapter to consider Christ's priestly office, I hope to show that, like the prophetic, Christ continues to exercise this office through ordained pastors in the church today. However, the tension between *Christ's* priestly work and the work of any other human that may be described as priestly or as participating in the priestly work of Christ is especially strong. For, priestly work is conceived in Reformed thought as containing the core of redemption, that is, it is *the central work of Christ* in gaining and accomplishing salvation. Thus, to speak of any human priests or an ongoing priesthood other than Jesus Christ's is viewed as a usurpation of that which only he could ever do for us. Generally, the only exception to this is the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" about which I will say more below.

What I hope to accomplish in this chapter is to highlight some objections raised against the idea of any ongoing priests besides Christ, then to offer from

within the Reformed tradition evidence and reasons why it is both legitimate and appropriate to speak of priestly ministry other than Christ's without violating or supplementing his unique and irreplaceable priesthood. In contrast to any kind of supplementation or violation of Christ's priesthood, I hope to show that the senses and ways in which ordained pastors exercise a priestly ministry is yet another demonstration of Christ's *own ongoing priestly work*. In other words, it is not so much that pastors are priests as that they are the designated servants through whom Christ's present priestly work is made manifest and brought to us.

Opposition in Reformed Thought to Priests Other than Christ

In his description of the priestly office of Christ, Calvin summarizes the argument of Hebrews thus:

The priestly office *belongs to Christ alone* because by the sacrifice of his death he blotted out our own guilt and made satisfaction for our sins. God's solemn oath, of which he "will not repent," warns us what a weighty matter this is "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." *God undoubtedly willed in these words to ordain the principal point on which, he knew, our whole salvation turns.* For, as has been said, we or our prayers have no access to God unless Christ, as our High Priest, having washed away our sins, sanctifies us and obtains for us that grace from which the uncleanness of our transgressions and vices debars us. Thus we see that we must begin from the death of Christ in order that the efficacy and benefit of his priesthood may reach us.¹

Virtually every description of the threefold office of Christ in Reformed literature makes the case that the three offices are so intertwined that they should never be thought of apart from one another even though they can be distinguished from one

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559)*, Library of Christian Classics XXI, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:502, bk. 2.15.6. Emphasis mine.

another. As L. Berkhof notes, “The mediatorial work is always a work of the entire person; not a single work can be limited to any one of the offices.”² Nevertheless, as is evident even in Calvin’s thought, the priestly office and work of Christ carries a weight beyond that of the others. This eternal, “Melchizedekian” priesthood of Christ, Calvin argues, manifests “the principal point on which...our whole salvation turns.” This principal point has to do with the washing away of our sins, sanctification, and the securing of the grace “from which the uncleanness of our transgressions and vices debars us.” In other words, in the priestly office of Christ we are dealing with matters of satisfaction, atonement, and the holiness without which no one can see the Lord—with atonement understood as that which removes the guilt and any other grounds for God’s alienation from us so that the estrangement that is our own fault is righteously overcome. God remains just even as he is the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26 ESV).

As I noted in chapter 2, Christ’s mediatorial work is often thought of specifically or especially as his priestly work. To quote again from Horton, “we often think of the role of a mediator in priestly terms.”³ Although Horton makes a strong case for seeing Christ’s mediatorial office and work as encompassing the whole of the threefold office, he rightfully recognizes that the mediating work of Christ always includes Christ’s priestly work: “Christ’s priestly ministry is inseparable

² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 357.

³ Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 209.

from his role as mediator of the elect.”⁴ Just like Calvin, Turretin, Hodge, Berkhof, and others, immediately after a discussion of the priestly office of Christ, Horton engages in a much lengthier discussion of the doctrine of atonement. Similarly, Van Gemeren and Velema give far more space to questions of atonement than to the priestly office itself. In other words, Christ’s priesthood finds its focal point in atonement rather than anything else as the Westminster Larger Catechism puts it in the first half of the answer to question 45, “Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering himself a sacrifice without spot to God, to be a reconciliation for the sins of his people.”

The priestly terms used to describe Christ’s mediatorial office inevitably crystalize as descriptions of atonement or other salvation-accomplishing realities. Ursinus, for example, explains that the mediator “offers himself as a satisfaction in our behalf” and Turretin says a mediator is one who “conciliates the discordant by making satisfaction to the offended party and going security for the future fidelity and obedience of the offending party, so that no cause of disagreement may afterwards arise between them.”⁵ The satisfaction in view is the atoning work of Christ. This same emphasis on the centrality to redemption of the priestly work of Christ is highlighted in Van Gemeren’s and Velema’s statement that “In Christ’s ministry we do see the prophetic, priestly, and kingly perspectives alternate in

⁴ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 486.

⁵ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (1852; repr., Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.), 94; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology (1679)*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2:375-6, topic 14, quest. 1, sec. 4.

prominence, i.e., especially the prophetic perspective in his preaching, *the priestly perspective in his sacrifice*, and the kingly perspective in his sitting at the right hand of God.”⁶ Interpreting Heidelberg Catechism Q. 31, they conclude, “What is confessed here means therefore that as Prophet he [Christ] shows us the way of redemption, as Priest he *accomplishes our redemption*, and as King he preserves us in the redemption.”⁷ Note the focus on the priestly service *accomplishing* redemption. Neither the prophetic office nor the royal office find their terminus or primary work in accomplishing salvation but in directing attention to it or in maintaining the redeemed in a state of grace. It is the priestly and the priestly alone that appears to be the primary salvific office because it is that which atones for sin.

The link between priestly service and atonement in Reformed thought militates against seeing anyone else in any sense to be a priest in the church. In other words, there is repeated emphasis on the fact that Christ alone is priest and alone the one who is able to do all that which atones for sin and reconciles us to God. Charles Hodge, for example, argues that the design and nature of the office of priest itself demonstrates why only Christ is priest. He offers four reasons. First, “No man, save the Lord Jesus Christ, has liberty of access unto God.”⁸ This follows from the fact that all humans are sinful and thereby debarred from God’s presence. Thus, someone must approach God on their behalf. Second, Christ’s sole priesthood is based on the fact that “No other sacrifice than his could take away sin.” Third,

⁶ J. Van Gemeren and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Gerrit Bilkes and Ed M. van der Maas (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 466. Emphasis mine.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 467.

⁸ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979. Reprint.), 2:466.

Hodge explains that only through Christ is God “propitious to sinful men.” Fourth, it is only through Christ “that the benefits which flow from the favour of God are conveyed to his people.”⁹ Hodge’s second and third arguments especially show the connection between Christ’s priestly office and atonement. It is Christ who is the sacrifice that takes away sin and is a propitiation. In the next section of his work, Hodge goes on to state, “Expiation, propitiation, reconciliation, and intercession are the several aspects under which the work of Christ as a priest, is presented in the Word of God.”¹⁰ Clearly, if these acts are definitive of the priestly office, especially the first three, any other human who might appropriate the title of priest could be seen as a usurper of Christ’s office. For this reason, the moment any official of the church is described with sacerdotal language, the red flags are raised in protest because Christ’s unique, unrepeatable, and irreplaceable work appears to be at stake.

Besides the argument from atonement, the “Melchizedekian” nature of Christ’s priesthood informs a Reformed view of Christ’s priestly office and thus grounds the rejection of any ongoing human priesthood. For example, Turretin makes the argument that Melchizedek’s priesthood provided for “no adjuncts (whether as successors or vicars or secondary priests), but was included in Melchizedek alone, every other being excluded.”¹¹ If Melchizedek, as the type foreshadowing the coming antitype, had no assistants, partners, adjuncts in his ministry how much more ought the fulfillment in Christ to be without associates:

⁹ Ibid., 2:466.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2:468.

¹¹ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.9.17 (2:411).

“For if the figure is restricted to one person, why not the verity with a better right?”¹²

Melchizedek’s priesthood stands in contrast to Aaron’s. Aaron was never alone even as high priest. Provision was made for his sons to participate in the priestly work and for replacement of the high priest upon his death. But Melchizedek never had a successor or any inferior priests working with him. Given that Christ is the fulfillment of this priesthood, the logical conclusion is that he, too, has neither successor nor inferior serving under him. This is to emphasize the “once-for-all” uniqueness of Christ’s priestly work.

In his zeal to protect the uniqueness of Christ’s priesthood, Hodge goes so far as to describe even the priests of the Old Testament as “not really priests.” To be fair, Hodge is making the point that the priests in the Aaronic order typified “the true priesthood of Christ.”¹³ Nevertheless, even though called priests, they are not really so. By virtue of the fact that these priests typified Christ rather than being true priests, their work in itself had no actual atoning or purifying power—the definition of the true priest. Rather, they served to remind the people of their guilt “and of their need of the more effectual sacrifice predicted in their Scriptures.”¹⁴ Given that these men “were not really priests, except typically, much less are ministers of the gospel.”¹⁵ In other words, Hodge’s reasoning against describing the priests of the Aaronic order as true priests extends all the more to ministers in the church. Ministers are never called priests in the New Testament even though they

¹² Ibid., 411.

¹³ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:466.

¹⁴ Ibid., 466.

¹⁵ Ibid., 466.

are described with honored titles: “They are called the bishops of souls, pastors, teachers, rulers, governors, the servants or ministers of God; stewards of the divine mysteries; watchmen, heralds, but never priests.”¹⁶ Turretin makes a similar argument when he writes, “Second, that priesthood [a secondary or inferior but ongoing priesthood other than Christ’s] we do not anywhere in the New Testament read of as having been instituted by Christ or by his apostles. Paul enumerates various orders of sacred offices both ordinary and extraordinary (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4), but concerning priests of the New Testament he preserves a deep silence.”¹⁷

It is important to observe here how Reformed thought is especially dependent upon the New Testament for its formulation of church offices. Since the Old Testament forms were types and shadows, it is to the New Testament the Reformed look for the corresponding fulfillment with respect to office. Since Christ is the fulfillment of every form of Old Testament priesthood, whether Aaronic or Melchizedekian, there can be no others beyond or besides him. Thus, the silence of the New Testament with respect to a continuing order of priests besides Christ is actually not a silence but a resounding “no” to such an office.

According to Hodge, the Protestant Reformation demonstrated that not only are gospel ministers never called priests in Scripture, “No priestly function is ever attributed to Christian ministers.”¹⁸ In other words, it is not enough simply to show that pastors are neither priests nor called priests but that they engage in no priestly

¹⁶ Ibid., 467.

¹⁷ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.9.19 (2:412)

¹⁸ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:467.

activities. Hodge assumes that if priestly activity of any kind is attributed to gospel ministers, then they could legitimately be described as priests. What Hodge actually has in mind, however, is that if any of the definitive, atonement-type functions are attributed to ministers, they would be priests in the true sense and thereby impinge on Christ's honor. The reason I interpret Hodge in this way is that he allows for two senses in which every believer *is* a priest just as he is making the case against calling ministers priests. The two senses are that every believer can intercede in prayer on behalf of others and every believer has "liberty of access to God through Christ."¹⁹ The reference to intercession is stated negatively, "they [Christian ministers] have no power as intercessors which does not belong to every believer." Gospel ministers do act in a priestly capacity but this is no different from any other Christian since all Christians have the right to pray for others—a form of intercession. Furthermore, ministers act in a priestly capacity for themselves in their right to approach God just as every believer, through Christ, has the right to approach God, whether in prayer, worship, or otherwise, without any other human being required as a middle person. Both of these privileges are part of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. I will return to make further observations about this below. For now, it is sufficient to recognize that the fact that all believers, whether understood individually or as a corporate whole, can be described with priestly language. If priestly language can be used to describe believers in general, then what prevents such language from being used to describe church officers?

¹⁹ Ibid., 2:467.

Part of the answer to that question arises from one of the key characteristics included in common Reformed definitions and descriptions of priestly office, namely, a priest is “A man duly appointed to act for other men in things pertaining to God.”²⁰ It is not only the fact that Christ offers atonement that makes him a priest but the fact that he represents his fellow human beings in the approach to God. This “middle man” position is definitive for priestly service. As Letham explains, “Whereas the prophets are supremely the mouthpiece of God and bring the word of God to bear on the situation of their contemporaries, priests are those whose main function is to intercede for their fellow human beings in the presence of God. Put crudely, if the prophet is God’s representative before humanity, the priest is humanity’s representative before God.”²¹ In other words, priestly work is that of humans approaching God whereas prophetic work is God approaching humans. Turretin: “A prophet who treats with men in the name of God differs from a priest who treats with God in the name of men.”²² A priest’s actions almost always have a Godward orientation as opposed to a human-ward. They are intended to fulfill all that which pleases God and to make it possible for him to extend grace to humankind. If anyone other than Christ plays this role, Christ’s honor is affected and an impediment is introduced preventing the Christian, who has a right to God, from approaching him without an additional intermediary beyond Christ.

Turretin elucidates this line of thought when he contrasts the priestly office with the prophetic. He disallows any analogy between the two that is used to argue

²⁰ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:464.

²¹ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1993), 105.

²² Turretin, *Institutes*, 14.9.18 (2:412).

for the propriety of secondary priests besides Christ . He offers four reasons. The first is most germane: "A prophet who treats with men in the name of God differs from a priest who treats with God in the name of men. As to the former, Christ, remaining in heaven, requires ministers who (making up for his bodily presence) may visibly address men and frequently reach them; but as to the latter, since Christ is always present with the Father and the sacrifice once offered is of indefinite virtue, he does not require ministers to sacrifice in his place."²³ Having ministers who act in a prophetic capacity for preaching and teaching Christ's word is necessitated by the reality that Christ's local, bodily presence is absent from earth. Thus, the use of ministers for teaching in no way derogates from Christ's supremacy as pastor and teacher of the church. In contrast, since Christ is locally present before God in heaven and his once-for-all sacrifice at the cross is sufficient, there is no need for additional priests to represent humans before God or to offer additional sacrifices. Put another way, there is no need for supplemental God-directed action because Christ fulfills all such necessary action.

Recognizing this God-orientated dimension of priestly work is crucial to further the discussion of the possibility of an office in the church that continues to engage in some kind of priestly ministry. Christ's non-duplicable work must be protected and guarded from any incursion of our own ability or action. By definition, Christ's atoning work is a work that only he could do. It is so much his work and his alone that it cannot even be attributed to the Father or the Spirit although all external works of the Trinity are undivided. Sherman makes this case

²³ Ibid., 2:412. Notice again the emphasis on sacrifice as a defining characteristic of priesthood.

when he argues that Christ's priestly work, in contrast to his kingly and prophetic, "should be understood as his own proper work as the incarnate Son."²⁴ While Christ engages in the kingly work of rule and governance on behalf of the Father and the prophetic work of teaching and preaching on behalf of the Spirit, Christ's engagement in priestly work is properly his very own. Priestly work is properly Christ's because he alone of the three persons of the Trinity became incarnate. As Sherman states, "The second person of the Trinity does indeed have a particular and proper function, which only he can serve based on the fact that he alone was to become the incarnate One."²⁵ The incarnation is a prerequisite if the eternal Son is to serve as priest and offering on behalf of humankind. Being the Incarnate One, Christ is properly the priest.

Given these emphases in Reformed thought, to be able to attribute priestly activity to ordained office, the argument must demonstrate that the office in no way encroaches upon or seeks to repeat that which is properly only the work of the Son. I believe the key lies in identifying and emphasizing aspects of priestly work and function that are *not* God-orientated but are instrumental in bringing God's grace to people. I have defined grace as God's freely given, transforming power. If priestly service is restricted to garnering God's grace, that is, acting in the capacity of removing the grounds of alienation, then, even though it gains grace it is not conveying that grace to anyone. It would merely make the reality of grace a hypothetical possibility. But, if priestly work includes applying redemption in its

²⁴ Robert Sherman, *King, Priest, and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of Atonement, Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 169.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

length and depth to humans, the direction of the priest's work is changed or, at least, is recognized to encompass more than atonement and the making of the approach to God possible. It includes a humanward component by which Christ is putting into effect in the lives of individuals the salvation he has won for them.

Resolving the Tension, Part 1

At this stage, it is useful to reiterate a point made previously about the continuity of Christ's offices. The uniform witness of Reformed confessional documents stresses the fact not only that Christ was prophet, priest, king in his earthly life and ministry, but that he continues so after his ascension. The distinction is typically iterated in the language of Christ's humiliation and exaltation, humiliation being the term describing incarnation and exaltation the term describing resurrection, ascension, and session at the Father's right hand. The *munus triplex* applies to both states. In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 23, "Christ, as our Redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation." Van Gemeren and Velema put it this way, "When we make the well-known distinction between the work of Christ in his state of humiliation and that in his state of exaltation (see § 30.3), it implies that he is simultaneously prophet, priest, and king in both states."²⁶ This means Christ's priesthood is not restricted to what he once did in history on earth at the cross but it includes his continuing fulfillment of "priestly ministry now

²⁶ Van Gemeren and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 466.

that he is with God in heaven. He lives forever to intercede for his people (Heb. 8:1-2; 7:25)."²⁷

As may be obvious, this perpetual and ongoing priestly function does not require that Christ repeatedly offer himself a sacrifice for sin. Rather, it is in the efficacy of his completed work that he now intercedes on behalf of his people and engages in other aspects of the priestly ministry. This means that the priestly office is not unoccupied as Turretin explains, "Therefore, although the act of sacrifice ceased on earth, the priesthood is not on that account unoccupied, since a priest is not ordained only for offering, but also for interceding and executing other functions."²⁸ The nature of this intercession and the other functions will be taken up below. Suffice it to say, it is considered critical in Reformed thought to maintain this ongoing priestly work of Christ just as it is important, as noted in the last chapter, for his prophetic work to be ongoing.

If Christ continues to engage in the work of his priestly office, we can legitimately conclude that the ministry of the church is the ministry of Christ himself. Torrance explains: "The ministry of the Church is related to the ministry of Christ in such a way that in and through the ministry of the Church it is always Christ Himself who is at work, nourishing, sustaining, ordering, and governing His Church on earth."²⁹ If it is Christ who continues to minister, any ministry that the church does finds its power and source in Christ, the Head of the church. The relationship between the ministry of Christ and that of the church is therefore the

²⁷ Ibid., 466.

²⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, 14.9.25 (2:416).

²⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (London: T & T Clark, 2003. Second Edition.), 37.

relationship between the Head and his body so that the body serves at the behest of the Head. In relation to the church's participation, therefore, in the ministry of Christ, Torrance is right to conclude, "The Church participates in Christ's ministry by *serv*ing Him who is Prophet, Priest, and King."³⁰ This is so because Christ the head does not cease from his work nor does he relinquish his authority over all his work. Thus, all we do in ministry is always in service to Christ so that the fact that he is the real minister is never lost. This line of thought applied to the whole *munus triplex* has already been explored in chapter two. I merely reiterate it here as applied to priestly service.

Just as with the prophetic office, we have to ask, "Where do we see the manifestation of Christ's continuing priestly office? Is it restricted to the heavenly realm where he is locally present? Or does he make it available to our senses here on earth and within the church?" The answer to this question is twofold. First, Christ's priestly office is manifest in a general way through all believers or through believers understood corporately. Second, it is my contention that the priestly work of Christ is manifested to us and assured to us in a heightened and distinguishable sense through the pastoral office.

The participation of all believers in the priestly office of Christ is codified in Heidelberg Catechism Q. 32:

But why are you called a Christian?

Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing, so that I may confess his name, offer myself a living sacrifice of gratitude to him, and fight

³⁰ Ibid., 37.

against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures.³¹

The believer participates in Christ and is thereby able to offer himself “a living sacrifice of gratitude” to Christ. Making offerings is priestly service. The catechism is echoing a similar point made by Calvin who explains that Christ’s priestly work was not only to effect reconciliation for us with the Father “but also to receive us as his companions in this great office. For we who are defiled in ourselves, yet are priests in him, offer ourselves and our all to God, and freely enter the heavenly sanctuary that the sacrifices of prayers and praise that we bring may be acceptable and sweet-smelling before God.”³² The doctrine of the so-called priesthood of all believers consists in the privilege of offering one’s entire life to God, worshiping him in private as well as in the church gathered together, and interceding in prayer for one another. With respect to our offering ourselves to God, whether in private worship or the daily, all-of-life service to God, or in public assembled worship, our offering is acceptable to the Father because “we please him as pure and clean” as a result of our union with Christ in his holiness as priest.

The focus in Calvin’s description is on the priesthood of believers in union with Christ for the purpose of making offerings to God. But, this is only half of the work of a priest. The other half, not unrelated to the first part, is to intercede for others. Turretin argues that the priesthood of Christ consists in two chief tasks: “both offering himself up once as a victim for them and by interceding for them

³¹ Heidelberg Catechism in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

³² Calvin, *Institutes* 2.15.6 (2:502).

always with the Father.”³³ This is codified in the Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 24, “Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God; and in making continual intercession for us.”³⁴ I’ll address the nature of Christ’s intercession and its counterpart in ordained ministry below. For now, it is proper to note that Christ’s intercession has a counterpart in the life of every Christian for “one child of God may pray for another or for all men. To intercede is in this sense merely to pray for.”³⁵ One of the privileges and responsibilities for every believer is to engage in prayer lifting up not only one’s own interests and concerns but also those of others.

Unfortunately, this doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has often been misunderstood and misused among Protestants. Letham explains that in the name of this doctrine the concept of ordained ministry has been opposed. The doctrine is used to argue “that each individual believer is on a par and so each has access to God, freedom to approach him in prayer, and equal privilege to minister to the body of Christ.”³⁶ In my experience, and as noted by Letham, this line of thought is then pressed to insist that ordination to office, if it should be practiced at all, in no way gives the church officer a higher station or standing in the church nor, therefore, is his ministry in any sense specially empowered by God. As Letham points out, ordination is sometimes viewed “as an infringement of the fundamental equality of

³³ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.8.2 (2:403).

³⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

³⁵ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:594.

³⁶ Letham, *Work of Christ*, 121.

believers, each of whom has been endowed with priestly privilege by Christ.”³⁷ The fact remains, however, that neither ordination nor the priestly privilege of every believer needs to stand opposed. They are not mutually exclusive concepts.

Although the priesthood of all believers is often applied to individuals, it is in reality a joint or corporate priesthood as opposed to an individual. In Letham’s words, “Where the Bible talks of a priesthood for the believer the primary reference is in fact to the church. It is a corporate priesthood given by Christ to his church.”³⁸ Torrance makes a similar argument building again on the imagery of the church as the body of Christ. The Church is Christ’s body that he is pleased to use in his ministry. The participation of the church in the ministry of Christ is therefore understood corporately, all the more so because “the Church is formed by One Spirit into One Body with Christ.”³⁹ Because of this formation of a unity, Torrance insists that “the ministry of the Church is *primarily corporate*.” Another way of expressing this is to say that the priesthood of all believers is most manifest when the church gathers publicly for worship in order to fulfill the Petrine mandate of 1 Pet 2:4-10. The royal priesthood is called together to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ and to proclaim together the excellencies of the One who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. Throughout this section of 1 Pet the emphasis falls on priestly activity engaged in *corporately and jointly* rather than as discrete and separate individuals. For the very reason that individuals ought to be viewed from the perspective of their union with the church body as a whole, “office

³⁷ Ibid., 121.

³⁸ Ibid., 121.

³⁹ Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 35.

in the church can be seen as a way to share in the priestly work of Christ that is given to the church and not as an intrusion on the equality of all individual believers.”⁴⁰

Officers of the church are one of the ways that Christ’s priesthood is manifested and effected within the corporate body of the church. Jesus ministers through his appointees. Van Gemeren and Velema: “In his continuing work Christ does employ people whom he calls to be officebearers.”⁴¹ There is no conflict between a corporate priesthood and individuals whom Christ chooses to use for accomplishing his ends. As a matter of fact, with respect to Christ’s priestly ministry, Ursinus explains that one of the ways this priestly work is manifested is when Christ “through the ministers of the word and the Holy Spirit, collects, illuminates and sanctifies his church.”⁴² Whether through individual ordained ministers or through the corporate priesthood, it is still Christ, by the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit, who is at work in and among his people. Along these lines, Hamstra describes part of John Williamson Nevin’s view of the ministry:

The third essential ingredient to Nevin’s understanding of the office of the ministry deals with its purpose and function. Nevin taught that God designed the office of the ministry as *the* medium by which His grace is channeled to the world and His people so that individuals are elevated to true dignity and so that, as a result, the moral fiber of community is enhanced. Ministers transmit the life-transforming power of God that will “build people in the faith and hope of the gospel unto everlasting life.” “Ministers of Christ,” therefore, “are set in the world to be at once the representatives of His authority and ambassadors of His grace.” Extending the work of the apostles, they continue the three-fold work of Jesus as prophet, priest, and king.⁴³

⁴⁰ Letham, *Work of Christ*, 123.

⁴¹ Van Gemeren and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 467.

⁴² Ursinus, *Commentary on Heidelberg Catechism*, 175.

⁴³ Sam Hamstra, Jr., “John Williamson Nevin: The Pastoral Office,” *The New Mercersburg Review* 16 (1994): 10. Emphasis his.

Ministers of Christ—the pastoral office—are used by Christ to bring his grace to bear upon the world and his people. This does not militate against the privilege of every Christian in union with Christ but it recognizes Christ’s own chosen system to apply his grace. In describing Bullinger’s perspective, Van der Borgh explains, “On the one hand, we must not forget that it is God himself who calls people, but, on the other hand, we must not despise the service of people called by God. They are, after all, not servants of people, but servants of God whose aim is the salvation of humankind.”⁴⁴

Bullinger’s perspective was adopted as the official view of the Swiss Reformed churches in the Second Helvetic Confession. In chapter 18, the use of ministers in bringing God’s grace to the people is clearly articulated in numerous ways. For example, the confession states, “It is true that God can, by his power, without any means join to himself a Church from among men; but he preferred to deal with men by the ministry of men. Therefore ministers are to be regarded, not as ministers by themselves alone, but as the ministers of God, inasmuch as God effects the salvation of men through them.”⁴⁵ This ministry neither conflicts with the priesthood of all believers nor is it simply, however, a subset: “the priesthood and the ministry are very different from one another.” All believers share in the priesthood but not all are called and appointed to the ministry.

Crucial for maintaining proper balance, however, is the recognition that ministers are precisely ministers. In other words, the language of servant and

⁴⁴ Eduardus Van der Borgh, *Theology of Ministry: A Reformed Contribution to an Ecumenical Dialogue* (Boston, Mass.: Brill Academic, 2007), 113.

⁴⁵ Second Helvetic Confession 18.

service is germane to a Reformed understanding of office in general and pastoral office in particular including its priestly components. Once again, Van der Borgh on Bullinger: “Bullinger distinguishes between the *sacerdotium* of all believers in order to offer spiritual sacrifices to God, and the *ministerium* in order to govern the church.”⁴⁶ Note the choice of words: *ministerium* as opposed to *sacerdotium*. Rather than emphasizing priesthood within the gospel ministry, the emphasis is placed on the servanthood of the minister. This does not mean the two are mutually exclusive but that the focus is on acting as servant. The ministerial servant is further described in the Second Helvetic Confession as a steward of the mysteries of God.⁴⁷ The Confession explains that the mysteries of God are the gospel and the sacraments so that the minister is a servant of God to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. By acting faithfully in this capacity, the stewardship is fulfilled and God’s grace is ministered to people through the ordained ministry.

Can this ministry be legitimately described as a priestly ministry? Although there is a clear aversion to using the term priest to describe the pastor, no less a Reformed authority than Turretin acknowledges an appropriate application of the term to gospel ministers. The appropriate application is to understand gospel ministers as typical or figurative priests not actual priests making atoning sacrifices. Referring to the passage in Isa 61:6 that speaks of believers being called priests and ministers, Turretin explains that this refers to one of two things. Either it is a reference to the spiritual and mystical priesthood of all believers or “the gospel

⁴⁶ Van der Borgh, *Theology of Ministry*, 114.

⁴⁷ Second Helvetic Confession 18 in in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

ministry is meant, which is expressed by a legal phrase on account of the analogy of both.” The analogy between priests and gospel ministers is found in the fact that just as God used the priests in the Old Testament “to conserve the method of divine worship, so in the Christian church he willed to use the sacred ministry by which the elect might be led to Christ and having been led might constantly persevere in his service.”⁴⁸ So, the language of priesthood can be applied to ministers in this figurative and analogical sense. They are not true priests offering true sacrifices but like the ancient priests they are appointed to care for the temple and worship of God, the temple today being the church. This is another way of recognizing a cultic dimension to pastoral service. And cultic service, whether of all (priesthood of all believers) or of some (pastors), is service that is always priestly.

Turretin offers an explanation for the propriety of “the ancients” having applied the term priest to gospel ministers. It was not because gospel ministers offered any form of external sacrifice. Rather, the term was used for two reasons. First, the term priest was used because “ministers consecrate themselves to the work of the ministry.”⁴⁹ Whether Turretin might have in mind the act of ordination as part of this consecration is unclear. What is clear is that the act of consecrating, of setting apart for sacred use, is considered a priestly action. Ministers consecrate themselves to their calling and thus can be described as priests—still understood figuratively. Second, Turretin explains that through the preaching of the gospel, ministers “(as it were) slay the people of God and offer them to God as a sacrifice

⁴⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, 14.9.28 (2:416).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 417.

well pleasing to him.”⁵⁰ Turretin bases this second point on the Apostle Paul’s expression in Rom 15:16 where he speaks of offering the Gentiles to God, sanctified through the Spirit. The Pauline offering, to be sure, is “a mystical and figurative one, not a proper and visible one.”⁵¹ On this basis, however, the gospel minister can be described with priestly language and what he is doing as a priestly work.

It is also worth noting at this point that the Reformed tradition, especially in its Dutch manifestation, has not shied away from using priestly language to describe one of the offices of the church, namely, the diaconal. For example, R. B. Kuiper, describing the offices of the church in relation to Christ as head, writes, “Ministers, elders and deacons represent Christ as prophet, king and priest respectively.”⁵² A few chapters later, he comments, “An important task of a priest is to show mercy.”⁵³ On this basis, because deacons are tasked in Reformed churches with ministering to the material needs especially of the poor and needy, they represent Christ. The fact that deacons show mercy to those in need is sufficient in Kuiper’s mind to connect the diaconal work to Christ’s priestly office. Van Dellen and Monsma make the same point: “Deacons are, therefore, representatives of Christ as the merciful High Priest. They are ministers of God’s mercy and love in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁴ In contrast to the Dutch Reformed approach linking Christ’s priestly office with the diaconate I will argue in the next chapter that the diaconate should be seen as a manifestation of an

⁵⁰ Ibid., 417.

⁵¹ Ibid., 417.

⁵² R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 94. Reprint.

⁵³ Ibid., 121.

⁵⁴ Idzerd van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary: A Brief Examination of the Church Order of the Synod of Dort* (1954; repr., Wyoming, Mich.: Credo Books, 2009), 112.

aspect of the kingly office. For the present chapter, however, the reason for raising this point is to show that there is precedent for attributing priestly activity to an office of the church. If deacons can be thought of as manifesting the mercy of Christ and therefore fulfilling Christ's priestly office, how much more pastors manifest Christ's priestly work charged as they are with ministering the word of grace in the gospel and through the sacraments of the new covenant.

Resolving the Tension, part 2

Christ's priestly service always stands apart from any other priest's work especially in the area of making offerings and presenting sacrifices. Not only is Jesus Christ God incarnate and, therefore, by definition acting in a capacity that goes beyond any mere human, Jesus the priest is always also *the offering* by which reconciliation is effected between sinful humans and a righteous God. This fact is clearly recognized in Reformed thought. For example, Calvin states, "Although God under the law commanded animal sacrifices to be offered to himself, in Christ there was a new and different order, in which the same one was to be both priest and sacrifice."⁵⁵ Or, as Turretin puts it while contrasting the Levitical priests with Christ, "They [Levitical priests] differed from the victims which they offered and had to make expiation with others' blood; he [Christ] was at the same time Priest and victim who delivered himself up for us and by his own blood entered the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us."⁵⁶ This line of thought identifies Christ's

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15.6 (1:502).

⁵⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, 14.9.3 (2:407).

dual role as priest and as sacrifice. Generally, this dual role is subsumed under Christ's priestly office. By distinguishing his role as priest from his role as offering we begin to make room for the possibility of some form of ongoing priestly work that does not interfere with what only Christ can accomplish. Without question, there can be no other offering because, as Calvin puts it, "no other satisfaction adequate for our sins...could be found."⁵⁷ Yet, because we can distinguish between Christ's priesthood and Christ's act as the one and only sacrifice for sin, we can begin to discuss the priesthood apart from the notion of sacrifice.

Calvin also argues in the same sentence quoted in the paragraph above, that there is no other priest found "worthy to offer to God the only-begotten Son." Only Christ himself is worthy as a priest to offer himself. What makes Christ this worthy priest? The answer is what is often referred to in Reformed thought as the *active obedience* of Christ in distinction from his *passive obedience*. Passive obedience, as Murray reminds us, "does not mean that in anything Christ did was he passive, the involuntary victim of obedience imposed upon him."⁵⁸ Rather, the term "passive" [derived from Latin *patior*, to suffer] is meant to indicate the suffering that Christ underwent which finds its climactic fulfillment in his death. This is in order to fulfill the penal sanctions of the law. However, as Murray again reminds us, "the law of God has both penal sanctions *and* positive demands."⁵⁹ The fulfillment of the positive demands of God's law is Christ's active obedience in which he perfectly lives out the righteousness required by God. Christ's passive obedience, therefore,

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15.6 (1:502).

⁵⁸ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), 20. Reprint.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21. Emphasis mine.

highlights his act as the offering or sacrifice for sin. Christ's active obedience fulfills his priestly duty to reflect the perfect holiness of God. Horton explains it this way,

Jesus' priesthood does not, therefore, begin at Golgotha, but from eternity to his incarnation, life, and death, all the way to his present intercession in glory. His priestly life is referred to as his *active obedience* (i.e., actively obeying the entire law), distinguished from his *passive obedience* (i.e., his suffering at the cross)...His commission was to bring not only forgiveness of sins but also that positive righteousness that God wills for us and his world—and beyond this, the confirmation in that righteousness, peace, and blessedness of which the Tree of Life was the sacramental sign and seal.⁶⁰

By maintaining the distinction between Jesus' active and passive obedience, we are again enabled to separate his unique, non-repeatable, non-imitable sacrifice from his broader priestly service while also recognizing that he alone as priest perfectly fulfills the positive requirements of God's will—another unique action on Christ's part.

On the side of Christ's active obedience, although his perfection in this is impossible for humans to imitate—hence the need for Christ to do this in fulfillment of the covenant of works on our behalf—yet it is in this active obedience that he provides us a model we are to follow. Put in Petrine terms, Jesus left us footsteps that we might follow in them (1 Pet 2:21). Peter makes this statement in the context of discussing Christ's willing suffering in order to bear our sins—a priestly work. In other words, besides atonement, priestly service sets an example of godliness. As Horton points out, Jesus does his priestly work so that he might bring about the righteousness God desires in the world.

By distinguishing Christ as priest from Christ as offering, by distinguishing active from passive obedience, we find the beginnings of non-atonement priestly

⁶⁰ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 490.

service that no one would dispute ought to be carried on in the church. The Apostle Paul, in 1 Cor 11:1 writes, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (ESV). In the Pastoral Epistles, Timothy is urged to be an example of the Christian life: “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12 ESV). Both Paul and Timothy are gospel ministers even if of varying status, i.e., Paul is designated an Apostle while Timothy appears to be some kind of apostolic legate. The kind of exemplary life they are called to live is a fulfillment of the priestly duty to reflect the holiness of God. In ancient Israel, the priests’ apparel and their proximity to the Holy of Holies as they served in the Tabernacle or Temple distinguished them from the people of Israel in general. They were to exemplify God’s holiness. That duty was perfectly fulfilled by Christ. As he is no longer physically present, he continues to set this priestly example of holiness through his ministers. It is for this reason that gospel ministers are held to such a high standard of character and life as summarized in 1 Tim 3. By imitating Christ they are to provide a living example for other believers useful for a Christian’s sanctification. Although this is nowhere in Reformed thought described or designated as a means of grace, the fact remains that it is understood to be used of God for growth. Thus, it is a form of grace.

The Puritans regarded the sanctified, model character of a pastor as crucial along with his immersion and learning in the Scriptures. Sinclair Ferguson describes the Puritan minister in this way:

The marriage of true learning and personal godliness lay at the heart of the Puritan vision. A recurring note in their thinking was the apostolic injunction, ‘pay careful attention to yourselves’ (Acts 20:28); ‘guard your life...’ (1 Tim. 4:16). Personal godliness was the great essential. The chief

misery of the church, argued Richard Baxter, lies in the fact that there are too many men who are ministers before they are Christians.

And so the Puritan pastor was marked, first and foremost, by his personal growth in grace: his reading, study, knowledge of and obedience to God's Word in his own life.⁶¹

It is the minister, marked by this godliness, who is effective in ministry that conveys God's transforming grace. In a word, he must have experienced that grace personally and powerfully in order to transmit it. Ferguson argues that the picture presented by John Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress* captures the heart of the Puritan understanding and expectation of ministers when Christian arrives at Interpreter's House. Ferguson quotes the following portion of Interpreter speaking:

The man whose picture this is, is one of a thousand; he can beget children, travail in birth with children, and nurse them himself when they are born. And whereas thou seest him with his eyes lift up to heaven, the best of books in his hand, and the law of truth writ on his lips, it is to show thee that his work is to know, and unfold dark things to sinners even as also thou seest him stand as if he pleaded with men; and whereas thou seest the world cast behind him, and that a crown hangs over his head, that is to show thee that slighting and despising the things that are present, for the love that he hath to his Master's service, he is sure in the world that comes next to have glory for his reward...this is the only man whom the Lord of the Place whither thou are going hath authorized to be thy guide in all difficult places thou mayest meet with in the way.⁶²

Notice how it is only this man who turns away from worldliness "for the love that he hath to his Master's service," that is authorized to be a guide and who is able to beget spiritual children and rear them in the ways of the Lord. He is able to model the way of Christ in his life as well as teach Christ's word.

⁶¹ Sinclair Ferguson, "Puritans – Ministers of the World," *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Heritage, 2008), 9.

⁶² John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, edited by Roger Sharrock (Harmondsworth, U.K., 1965), 60-61, as quoted by Ferguson in "Puritans – Ministers of the World," 7-8.

Priestly Ministration of the Word

One of the points I hope has become sufficiently clear in the foregoing is that priestly work does not terminate exclusively in God, that it is not intended only or strictly to be that which makes possible the approach to God through the sacrificial offering. Rather, there are other dimensions of the priestly office that terminate in humans. In other words, priests are instrumental in bringing God's grace to his people. This is demonstrated in the description of Christ's priestly office provided by Ursinus. In his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, he argues that Christ's priestly office consists of "four principal parts": 1) to teach; 2) to offer himself the sacrifice for sin on our behalf; 3) continually to intercede for us; and 4) "to apply his sacrifice unto those for whom he intercedes."⁶³ As we've seen previously, Hodge includes this fourth point in his understanding of Christ's priestly service as well when he writes, "It is only through Him that the benefits which flow from the favour of God are conveyed to his people."⁶⁴ All four of these priestly functions are intended to secure and bring blessing to God's people. However, the first and the third, teaching and applying Christ's sacrifice are especially orientated toward bringing grace as the transforming power of God to his people. At the same time, even the third task, intercession, has a dimension that directly impacts Christ's people so that it can be viewed as conveying grace as well, in particular the grace of assurance. I will return to this last point below.

⁶³ Ursinus, *Commentary on Heidelberg Catechism*, 175.

⁶⁴ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:466.

Ursinus is not alone in designating teaching a component of priestly work. Berkhof acknowledges “the priests were also teachers during the old dispensation.”⁶⁵ Letham points out that priestly and prophetic duties often overlapped. For example, he explains, “The priest was, at one time, the one who could determine the will of Yahweh on pressing and important practical matters. He also had a teaching role.”⁶⁶ Immediately, Letham adds, “Both these tasks might be termed prophetic.” In other words, it is understandable to assume that prophets reveal God’s will and teach God’s word—a point I sought to make clear in the last chapter. Yet, in reality, the priests in Israel very often played this word-ministry role. The prophet Malachi even chastises the priests for falling short in this priestly work:

For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction.” (Malachi 2:7–9 ESV)

The priest is described as a messenger of God and one from whom the people ought to receive instruction.

Berkhof distinguishes this priestly teaching from the prophetic by relegating priestly instruction to emphasize explanations of the “ritual observance involved in the proper approach to God.”⁶⁷ He leaves to the prophets as their emphasis the work of instructing in the “moral and spiritual duties, responsibilities, and

⁶⁵ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 361.

⁶⁶ Letham, *Work of Christ*, 105.

⁶⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 361.

privileges.” I think Ursinus is closer to the mark, however, when he differentiates prophetic from priestly instruction on the basis of their specific gift and calling from God rather than the content of their instruction. Certainly the priests would have given instruction in the ceremonial and ritual God required. But, as Ursinus puts it, the difference lies in the extraordinary place of prophets in contrast to the ordinary place of priests: “The prophets received their doctrine immediately from God, whilst the priests learned it out of the law.”⁶⁸ The prophetic office was not formally established in the ecclesiology of ancient Israel as was the codified form of the priesthood that was to be passed on through the Aaronic line. Prophets were expected but they were not the ones charged in the law with the everyday instruction of the people in the ways of God. Furthermore, as I argued in the previous chapter, the prophetic role has an apocalyptic dimension through which God makes himself present to give life or to judge. The priestly role is the regular, day-to-day instruction without the apocalyptic overtones.

T. F. Torrance makes a strong case for the word-ministry of priests as well. He believes the Old Testament priesthood sustained what he terms a “double character.” On the one hand, the priests mediated God’s word. This point is especially brought home when account is taken of the fact that the priests functioned “only within the Covenant and the saving relation with the mighty Word of God which that Covenant brought to Israel.”⁶⁹ In other words, since God entered into covenant with his people, he gave them his words in the form of the covenant. It was within this covenantal relationship that the priesthood was established and

⁶⁸ Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 175.

⁶⁹ Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 2.

the documents of the covenant detailed the work of the priesthood along with all the other duties God mandated of his people. Included in the covenant was the liturgy, which Torrance argues, “was regarded by the Old Testament as an ordinance of grace initiated by God Himself and appointed by Him.”⁷⁰ However, all of what took place in the liturgy was not an act of man but of God’s salvific grace to which the liturgy bore witness: “It is actually God Himself who performs the act of forgiveness and atonement, but the priestly cultus is designed to answer to His act and bear witness to His cleansing of the sinner.”⁷¹ The second half of the double-character of the priesthood is this cultic witness to God’s revealed will.

This double-character of the priesthood is illustrated in the relationship of Moses and Aaron. Torrance sees Moses’ role to be “the unique mediator, the one who talks with God face to face and mouth to mouth.”⁷² Furthermore, “Moses is priest *par excellence*, whose mediatorial functions are seen as he pleads with God for Israel’s forgiveness...It is to Moses supremely that God reveals Himself in the establishing of the Tabernacle, and with Moses that He communes above the mercy-seat upon the Ark of Testimony (Num. 7.89; Exod. 25.22).”⁷³ Aaron, in contrast to Moses, has “secondary status.” He is the “liturgical priest who carries out in continual cultic witness the actual mediation that came through Moses.” Whether the primary mediation of the Word of God reflected in Moses or the secondary mediation that bears witness to the primary reflected in Aaron, the priestly ministry is encapsulated in a form of word-ministry. What this means is that the liturgical

⁷⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁷¹ Ibid., 3.

⁷² Ibid., 3.

⁷³ Ibid., 4.

priestly work is itself a form of the word. In Reformed thought, this enters into the discussion of the relationship of word and sacrament to which I will return below.

Jesus taught his disciples for three years. Some of those days included extraordinary acts drawing the reaction from the crowds, “A prophet has arisen among us.” But, for the most part, we can imagine how Christ purposely and repetitively taught his disciples. This would have been more in line with a priestly work of instruction. Since Christ remains the eternal priest, we expect to encounter him continuing this teaching role. This we do in the teaching ministry of pastors. Pastors are not called only or strictly to proclaim the word from the pulpit but also to engage in the daily administration of the word in a teaching and shepherding form whether with individuals or other subsets of the church. This is Christ’s priestly ministration of his word through his servants while Christ’s apocalyptic, prophetic proclamation and presence is manifested in a pastor’s preaching ministry in the larger, gathered assemblies of Christ’s church.

The Work of Intercession

Luke 22:31-34 records an exchange between Jesus and Peter that includes reference to Peter’s famous assertion that he is ready to go both to prison and death with Christ. In v 31-32, Luke indicates that Jesus speaks first and tells Peter that Satan has demanded to sift him like wheat. But, Jesus assures Peter, “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32 ESV). This passage, together with the so-called high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, form the foundation for the Reformed

understanding of the priestly intercession of Christ. Jesus, in his priestly capacity already while on earth, prays for his own. He intercedes on their behalf requesting of the Father blessing upon his disciples. Upon his ascension, Christ takes his place at the right hand of the Father and engages in continual intercession as the Letter of Hebrews repeatedly indicates. It is this ongoing prayer to the Father that constitutes Christ's priestly ministry of intercession which the

Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 55 summarizes in this way: "Christ maketh intercession, by his appearing in our nature continually before the Father in heaven, in the merit of his obedience and sacrifice on earth, declaring his will to have it applied to all believers; answering all accusations against them, and procuring for them quiet of conscience, notwithstanding daily failings, access with boldness to the throne of grace, and acceptance of their persons and services."⁷⁴

The intercessory work of Christ is associated with the application of redemption to his elect. His suffering ends at the cross, highlighted in his utterance of the words "It is finished" before giving up his soul. For historic Reformed thought, the completed portion is the satisfaction that has been made. Yet, this objective accomplishment of salvation is not the final form it will take. It must be brought to effect in the lives of actual people. The atonement is not hypothetical. It has saved. But those who have been saved by it must have it put into effect in history in their lives. This is the work of the application of redemption. Christ's intercessory work is part of the application as he sees to it that the merit of his completed work is placed before the Father—not that the Father would ever be

⁷⁴ Westminster Larger Catechism in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

unaware of the work his eternal Son did at his behest—as an answer to every accusation against his followers. There is no sin they can commit for which Christ's blood does not answer.

This work of Christ as intercessor has a direct impact upon his followers since it brings them into the throne room of grace. Because Jesus the Eternal High Priest is interceding on the basis of his once-for-all sacrifice, the way is opened for all who would come to him to have access to God's mercy, to have God's grace lavished upon them. And that grace, through Christ's intercession, functions to assure Christians that they have received mercy and are in favor with God. In the words of Calvin:

It follows that he is an everlasting intercessor: through his pleading we obtain favor. Hence arises not only trust in prayer, but also peace for godly consciences, while they safely lean upon God's fatherly mercy and are surely persuaded that whatever has been consecrated through the Mediator is pleasing to God.⁷⁵

Ursinus adds to this the reassuring thought that Christ has “the promise of being heard in reference to those things which he asks.”⁷⁶

The theme of assurance pervades the intercessory work of Christ in two additional ways. First, Christ as priestly mediator is the surety, the guarantor for us with respect to all sin including those yet future. Ursinus: “He becomes our surety, that we shall no more offend God by our sins.”⁷⁷ Hodge: “His offering Himself as our surety, not only that the demands of justice shall be shown to be satisfied, but that

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.15.6 (1:502).

⁷⁶ Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 175.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

his people shall be obedient and faithful.”⁷⁸ Turretin in describing the work of the Mediator writes of Christ’s office that it is “as a surety and satisfier, who conciliates the discordant by making satisfaction to the offended party and going security for the future fidelity and obedience of the offending party, so that no cause of disagreement may afterwards arise between them.”⁷⁹ Second, Christ’s priestly intercession is part of the assurance of salvation because, in the words of Letham, “It is virtually equivalent to the imparting of blessing in benediction.”⁸⁰

Since Christ’s intercessory work is established on the basis of his completed reconciling work, its outcome is never in question. Letham puts it this way, “the prayer is less a petition for a matter on which the will of God is not decisively known but more a request concerning something which has been definitely settled.”⁸¹ Given that “the great turning point in the drama of redemption has already occurred,” Letham argues that it is difficult to distinguish intercession from benediction. Benediction is understood as the “declaration of a state of affairs that actually existed already.”⁸² The promise of the Holy Spirit that Jesus makes at his ascension is the declaration of that which is already guaranteed to his disciples. It is confirmed on the day of Pentecost: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:33 ESV). Letham argues

⁷⁸ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:593.

⁷⁹ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.1.4 (2:375).

⁸⁰ Letham, *Work of Christ*, 120-21.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 156.

that every gift and blessing that comes through the Son is part of Christ's benediction, the assurance of God's favor, the declaration of what is now reality.

Benediction is a priestly work. God commanded Aaron and his sons to bless God's people. He gave them the Aaronic benediction of Num 6 and commanded that the priests place his name upon his people. Christ's profound fulfillment of this priestly work on the Day of Pentecost and since must not be missed.

So far, in our description of the intercessory work of Christ, we have described that which in the present takes place behind the scenes, out of physical sight, in the heavenly places. Christ is with the Father. How is his intercessory work manifested to us in a palpable form? The answer is that the gospel ministry, the office of pastor, manifests the intercessory work of Christ. This is evident in two ways.

First, Reformed church orders mandate that pastors engage in a ministry of prayer. Most certainly, every Christian is called to and has the privilege of prayer. The pastor is not necessary to make the prayer of any other believer acceptable or efficacious. But, just like the apostles in Acts 6 insisted that others be appointed to tend to the distribution of food so that they could give their undistracted attention to the ministry of the word and to prayer, so pastors are charged to engage in like ministry. We've seen the word-ministry both in its priestly dimension above and in its prophetic in the previous chapter. Here we focus on the ministry of prayer. The Westminster Assembly's *The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government and of Ordination of Ministers* prescribes the following:

First, it belongs to his office [the pastor],

To pray for and with his flock, as the mouth of the people unto God...The office of elder (that is, the pastor) is to pray for the sick, even in private, to which a blessing is especially promised; much more therefore ought he to perform this in the publick execution of his office, as a part thereof.

.....

To bless the people from God, Numb. vi. 23, 24, 25, 26. Compared with Rev. xiv. 5, (where the same blessings, and persons from whom they come, are expressly mentioned) Isa. Lxvi. 21, where, under the names of Priests and Levites to be continued under the gospel, are meant evangelical pastors, who therefore are by office to bless the people.⁸³

The prayers of the pastor are regarded as having a special blessing attached, in this case, particularly as they are prayers for the sick. Furthermore, the pastor is called to pray in the public assembly gathered for worship. Neither the private nor the public prayer is made on the basis of the pastor's own merit but on the basis of Christ's merit and in virtue of the pastor's office as representing Christ to the people. Even as others besides pastors may be permitted to pray in public worship, especially ruling elders, it does not detract from the cultic setting and therefore the priestly duty of the pastor. The same can be said of the pastor's authority to pronounce the benediction. He is acting as the voice of the Chief and only True Priest, Jesus Christ. Though the pastor is a typical or figurative priest, he is nevertheless acting in a priestly capacity on behalf of Christ. Only pastors are permitted to pronounce benedictions because they represent Christ's priestly office in a heightened and distinct way in comparison to believers in general.

⁸³ *Presbyterial Form of Church Government in Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 399-401.

Sacraments: A Priestly Ministration

According to the Second Helvetic Confession, the administration of the sacraments forms the second half of the core duties and work of the pastoral office. In chapter 18 under the subheading “Ministers as Stewards of the Mysteries of God,” the Confession is continuing its exposition of the Apostle Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 4:1 that he and others ministers in the church ought to be regarded as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. The mysteries of God are understood in two senses. First, with reference to Eph 3, the confession argues that the mysteries are the “Gospel of Christ.” On this basis, the confession concludes that the first part of the work of ministers is “to preach the Gospel of Christ to the faithful.” But, the mysteries of God include more: “And the sacraments of Christ are also called mysteries by the ancient writers.” Because the sacraments are part of the mysteries of God of which gospel ministers are stewards, this forms the second half of the work of ministers, “to administer the sacraments.” The double-work of ministers is reemphasized later in the same chapter of the Confession under the rubric of “The Duties of Ministers.” There it writes, “The duties of ministers are various; yet for the most part they are restricted to two, in which all the rest are comprehended: to the teaching of the Gospel of Christ, and to the proper administration of the sacraments.” The Belgic Confession emphasizes this same two-fold work in Article 30: “We believe that this true Church must be governed by the spiritual policy which our Lord has taught us in his Word—namely, that there must be Ministers or

Pastors to preach the Word of God, and to administer the Sacraments.”⁸⁴ We could add many more testimonies from other Reformed documents that make the same point. The uniform testimony of the Reformed tradition is that the administration of the sacraments is central to the office and work of the pastor.

It’s also important to recognize that the administration of the sacraments, although always under the oversight of a local session or consistory, which includes both the pastor(s) and ruling elders,⁸⁵ is by right and authority only to be administered by a pastor or minister.⁸⁶ No other officer of the church, whether an elder or a deacon, has the right and authority to dispense the sacraments even if they might assist in other ways, e.g., ruling elders and sometimes deacons assist with the distribution of elements to the congregation. The Westminster Larger Catechism makes this explicit and clear in part of the answer to Q. 176, “[the sacraments] are to be dispensed by ministers of the gospel, and *by none other*.”⁸⁷ The Larger Catechism is echoing the language of the Westminster Confession 27.4,

⁸⁴ Belgic Confession in Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

⁸⁵ The Church Order of the Synod of Dort, Article 64, states, “The administration of the Lord’s Supper shall take place only there where there is supervision of Elders, according to the ecclesiastical order and in a public gathering of the congregation” (Van Dellen and Monsma, *Church Order Commentary*, 382).

⁸⁶ The Westminster Assembly’s *Presbyterial Form of Church Government* recognizes two forms of ministers, those called pastors and those called teachers or doctors. Both pastors and teachers have the right of administering the sacraments: “Who [teacher/doctor] is also a minister of the word, as well as the pastor, and hath power of administration of the sacraments” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Free Presbyterian Publications edition, 401).

⁸⁷ Emphasis mine.

which states, “neither of which [Baptism and the Lord’s Supper] may be dispensed by any but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.”⁸⁸

How are the sacraments a priestly function? The priestly nature of the sacraments is part and parcel of their nature and definition. Without engaging in a full-orbed Reformed sacramental theology, I would like to highlight a few rudiments of the Reformed understanding which, I believe, will help demonstrate their priestly association.

First of all, the Reformed understanding of baptism is closely related to the Old Testament institution of circumcision. In confessional form, this point is most explicitly seen in the Second Helvetic Confession 19 where baptism and circumcision are viewed in parallel:

Some Are Sacraments of the Old, Others of the New, Testament. Some sacraments are of the old, others of the new, people. The sacraments of the ancient people were circumcision, and the Paschal Lamb, which was offered up; for that reason it is referred to the sacrifices which were practiced from the beginning of the world.

The Number of the Sacraments of the New People. The sacraments of the new people are Baptism and the Lord’s Supper

This parallel is often part of the argument used for establishing the biblical basis for baptizing infants as those who are not yet capable of making a profession of faith but who are considered to be within the boundaries of God’s people by virtue of one or both parents being Christians and therefore within the bounds of the covenant of grace with God. The parallel between baptism and circumcision is derived from Col 2:11-12: “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without

⁸⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:11–12 ESV).

The parallel between circumcision and baptism provides a link between baptism and priestly office. Circumcision was part of the sacramental system of the Old Testament that included the entire range of sacrificial and ceremonial religious rites. As such, even if circumcision does not have a clear mandate to be administered by a priest, it has a close association with priestly service because of its ceremonial nature. Thus, just as priests in the Old Testament arrangement were charged with and authorized to oversee and administer the sacrifices—all of which have a sacramental nature as signs and seals of the covenant—so, by analogy, ministers of the gospel act in a priestly capacity when they administer the covenant sign and seal of baptism. The analogy similarly holds for the Lord’s Supper as the continuance, in some form, of the Passover sacrifice. Even though the Passover would be celebrated in families, it appears that the sacrificial lamb was to be offered at the Temple (cf. Dt 16:5-7). Hence, it is inseparable from the priests who had the formal responsibility for performing the sacrifices.

With respect to the Lord’s Supper, it is important to note that it is in no sense regarded as an actual sacrifice in Reformed thought. As a matter of fact, the concept of sacrifice is rarely and only tangentially thought of. For example, in Westminster Confession 29.2, we read, “In this sacrament, Christ is not offered up to His Father; nor any real sacrifice made at all for the remission of sins of the quick or dead; but only a commemoration of that one offering up of Himself, by Himself, upon the

cross, once for all; and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God for the same....” First, notice the rejection of any *real sacrifice* or the offering up of Christ in the celebration of the sacrament. So, any sense in which the sacrament might be considered a real offering up of Jesus is rejected. Yet, it is still “a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God” for the once-for-all offering of Christ at the cross. Not so much because the Supper is an offering in itself but especially because it is inseparable from the once-for-all offering of Christ, it is part of a priestly ministration.

Two further points accentuate the priestly nature of the administration of sacraments in Reformed thought. First, the sacraments are required to be administered in the corporate assembly of the church. In other words, the private use of the Lord’s Supper is opposed. Westminster Confession 29.4 states, “Private masses, or receiving this sacrament by a priest or any other alone...are all contrary to the nature of this sacrament, and to the institution of Christ.” The Westminster *Directory for Worship* insists that baptism is to be administered publicly and in such form that the congregation is able to observe it clearly: “Nor is it [baptism] to be administered in private places, or privately, but in the place of publick worship, and in the face of the congregation, where the people may most conveniently see and hear....”⁸⁹ The same points are made in the Church Order of Dort in Articles 56 and 64. Why this emphasis on the public setting? The answer is that both sacraments, once again by analogy with the sacraments of the Old Testament, are associated with the Temple as that is the place of priestly service. Since there is no longer a

⁸⁹ *Westminster Confession*, Free Presbyterian Publications edition, 382.

physical temple but only a spiritual, that it is, the people of God as the temple of the Holy Spirit, the sacraments are to be administered where the temple is made manifest, namely in the corporate assembly of the church for worship. The association of the sacraments with the temple clearly brings into view their priestly administration since it was the priests who were authorized to dispense the sacraments in the Old Testament and, by analogy, the ministers of the gospel, under the New.

Second, the priestly nature of the administration of the sacraments is accentuated by the fact that sacraments are an extension of the word especially as confirmatory rites associated with the word. This is evident, for example, in the Second Helvetic Confession's definition of sacraments in chapter 19:

From the beginning, God added to the preaching of his Word in his Church sacraments or sacramental signs. For thus does all Holy Scripture clearly testify. Sacraments are mystical symbols, or holy rites, or sacred actions, instituted by God himself, consisting of his Word, of signs and of things signified, whereby in the Church he keeps in mind and from time to time recalls the great benefits he has shown to men; whereby also he seals his promises, and outwardly represents, and, as it were, offers unto our sight those things which inwardly he performs for us, and so strengthens and increases our faith through the working of God's Spirit in our hearts. Lastly, he thereby distinguishes us from all other people and religions, and consecrates and binds us wholly to himself, and signifies what he requires of us.

The sacraments consist of "his Word, of signs and of things signified." In other words, the material elements used in the sacraments—water for baptism, bread and wine for the Supper—as signs are not alone but are always accompanied by the word. In a manner of speaking, the sacraments can be described as palpable words. The Westminster Confession and Catechisms describe the sacraments as "sensible signs and seals" of the covenant of grace. They appeal to our senses of sight,

hearing, smell, taste, touch. But they are sensible for the express purpose of sealing the word of promise, that is, the covenant of grace. Thus, the *Westminster Directory for Publick Worship* enjoined that the Supper ought to be administered after the preaching of the word, that it ought to have a preceding exhortation just before administration, and that the words of institution of the Supper be read from one of the gospels or from 1 Cor 11.⁹⁰ The sacraments are inseparable from the word.⁹¹ When this word nature of the sacraments is taken together with my argument earlier based on Torrance's thought that the twofold priestly function included bearing witness to God's revealed will, his word, we can see again how the administration of the sacraments is a priestly function. In the ministerial administration of the sacraments, the minister is bearing witness to the will of God encapsulated in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, ministers are acting in a priestly capacity, representing Christ the one and only true priest, when they administer the sacraments.

As stated earlier, the sacraments are not considered acts of offering Jesus or sacrifices in Reformed thought. The emphasis falls on their function as means of grace. The Westminster Larger Catechism expresses this line of thought in the answer to Q. 154: "The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation." Thus, the priestly ministration by pastors of the sacraments is one of the

⁹⁰ *Westminster Confession*, Free Presbyterian Publications edition, 384-85.

⁹¹ For a thorough discussion of the relationship of word and sacrament in Reformed thought, see G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1969), chapter 1.

means by which Christ himself is active in applying to his people all of what he has acquired for them through his mediator. The involvement of the Holy Spirit is also acknowledged as the Catechism points out in Q. 161, “The sacraments become effectual means of salvation...by the working of the Holy Ghost, and the blessing of Christ, by whom they are instituted.” Even though human ministers act in a priestly capacity to dispense baptism and the Lord’s Supper, it is Christ himself who, through the Holy Spirit, meets his people to bless them through the minister’s action. It is an immense privilege for the minister to be the instrument by which Christ and the Spirit are working.

Conclusion

Although there is reticence in the Reformed tradition to speak of any kind of ongoing priestly office in the church, when priesthood is distinguished from atonement, priestly functions emerge that in no way detract from what only Christ could do. The functions include ministry of the word, intercession, and the administration of sacraments. Each of these—unlike atonement, which terminates in God—terminates in humans. In other words, each of these servant actions mediates grace from God to his people. As pastors fill the ordained church office called and tasked with these servant responsibilities, Christ himself continues his priestly ministrations by making them manifest in the church through the pastoral office.

CHAPTER 4

CHRIST THE KING:
MEDIATION THROUGH CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND THE MINISTRY OF MERCY

In *Institutes* 2.15.2, Calvin makes the statement, “As I have elsewhere shown, I recognize that Christ was called Messiah especially with respect to, and by virtue of, his kingship.” Even though this is the case, Calvin observes that Christ’s prophetic and priestly offices “have their place and must not be overlooked by us.”¹ Both the prophetic and priestly work were necessary to bring the fullness of God’s grace to his people. However, it is the kingly office, central at the same time to the concept of the kingdom of God, which embodies the all-encompassing fullness of God’s grace and blessing to his people. Calvin argues in *Institutes* 2.6.3 that the prophets—he is referring here to the Hebrew prophets—whenever they prophesied the deliverance of the church, not only prefigured Christ in those prophecies but always “they recall the people to the promise made to David that his kingdom would be everlasting.”² The kingdom of David that is to be reestablished is the heart and soul of redemption, deliverance, and salvation for God’s people: “In short, to show God merciful, all the prophets were constantly at pains to proclaim the kingdom of David upon which both redemption and eternal salvation depended.”³ Without this kingdom, there is neither redemption nor salvation and therefore no grace or blessing of any kind, which is another way of indicating that the kingly dimension of

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559)*, Library of Christian Classics XXI, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:496, bk. 2.15.2.

² *Ibid*, 1:345.

³ *Ibid*, 1:345.

the Mediator's work is an essential component of his mediation, perhaps even the central one.

Edmondson concurs with this line of thought as he argues, for Calvin, the kingly office may be viewed as Christ's "primary function as Mediator." He explains that "Christ's office as king is routinely neglected by commentators on Calvin's thought." For this reason, in his chapter on kingship in *Calvin's Christology*, Edmondson seeks to develop "a more weighty understanding of Calvin's handling of Christ's royal office." He reminds us that "Calvin has identified Christ's priestly office as his primary office in some places," yet, the justification Calvin gives for the primacy of the priestly "is that without Christ's expiatory sacrifice, a fallen humanity would have been entirely cut off from the blessings which Christ, as king, could have bestowed."⁴ Since the priestly work is intended to be restorative and redemptive, it is not in the end primary, while the kingly role mediating blessing always would have existed whether or not there had ever been a fall that necessitated reconciliation. Christ's royal office, understood as his headship over all creation including both humans and angels, is the means through which Christ mediates all good, all blessing from God to creation and this applies even prior both to the fall and the incarnation since Christ is always head of all creation. Thus, as Edmondson observes, "it is clear that his office as king over the Church compasses about his priestly office, both providing its necessary context and serving as its gracious and effective result."⁵

⁴ Stephen Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 146.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

Even with this apparent emphasis in Calvin on the primacy of the kingly office, in Reformed thought the priestly office, as I argued in chapter four, is usually viewed as Christ's central mediatory role to the point that the concept of mediation has often found its definition on the basis of the work of a priest. The Mediator is an intermediary because the priest is an intermediary. Clearly, as Edmondson notes, even Calvin will speak of the priestly office as primary while the scope of his overall thought shows that the kingly role is central to Christ's mediatory work. There can be no doubt that the Reformed tradition as a whole has placed the emphasis in the work of Christ on his atonement as the propitiation and expiation of sin so that a penal substitutionary view of atonement has dominated Reformed thinking and thus influenced the very concept of mediation.⁶ A penal substitutionary view is rooted in a commitment to the centrality of Christ's priestly service.

Even while maintaining a penal substitutionary view of the atonement, Reformed thought has always held that the work of Christ's kingship is a necessary component of our salvation. In other words, Christ's kingly work is not regarded as a mere "tack on" or subsidiary role in redemption but critical to the fullness of what the church receives through the work of Christ. As Calvin makes explicit in the title to 2.15 in his *Institutes*, to understand the purpose for which Christ was sent requires an understanding not only of the prophetic and priestly offices but the

⁶ The dominance of the penal substitutionary view is an historical one. At present, it is more difficult to say which view is dominant in Reformed thought. Certainly, among the theologically more conservative churches, a substitutionary view continues to dominate. In the mainline Reformed denominations, this is not necessarily so.

kingly as well.⁷ As I argued in chapter two, all three offices are mediatorial and define the work of Christ the Redeemer.

The pressing question is in what sense or in what way does Christ engage in royal mediation? What does it mean to speak of the mediation of the king? The answer lies in the Reformed concept of redemption perfected. In other words, bearing in mind that sin has infected, infested, and affected all of life and creation, salvation is not fully complete without bringing humankind and all creation to a state of purity and perfect obedience to, and therefore harmony with, God. Another way of stating this is to say God's rule in Christ must extend to all of life in order to bring life under his lordship. This is to say the kingdom must grow to the point that the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of God and of his Christ.⁸

For this kingdom to reach its zenith in the eschaton, Christ had to engage in royal work as the divine warrior king in his earthly ministry. Thus, the starting point for the present chapter is to provide an overview of a Reformed *Christus Victor* view of atonement. As this project is concerned with the mediation of grace, the next step of the argument will highlight some of the kingly ways in which Christ mediates his grace to the church, or, using language more common to Reformed works, kingly ways in which Christ applies the benefits of his redemptive work. The final section will show the connection with office in the church of Christ's ongoing kingly work.

⁷ The full title of *Institutes* 2.15 reads, "To Know the Purpose for Which Christ Was Sent by the Father, and What He Conferred Upon Us, We Must Look Above All at Three Things in Him: the Prophetic Office, Kingship, and Priesthood" (1:494).

⁸ See Revelation 11:15.

Christus Victor: The Divine Warrior King and Judge

Enumerating reasons that necessitate the Mediator be both true God and true man, Calvin writes:

For the same reason it was also imperative that he who was to become our Redeemer be true God and true man. It was his task to swallow up death. Who but the Life could do this? It was his task to conquer sin. Who but very Righteousness could do this? It was his task to rout the powers of the world and air. Who but a power higher than world and air could do this? Now where does life or righteousness, or lordship and authority of heaven lie but with God alone? Therefore our most merciful God, when he willed that we be redeemed, made himself our Redeemer in the person of his only-begotten Son.⁹

The martial imagery cannot be missed: swallow up death, conquer sin, rout the powers of the world and air. The work of the Redeemer is the work of a Divine warrior who battles on behalf of his people to free them from death, sin, and the oppression of evil. Martial actions are actions of a king who has the authority to command them and engage in them. In this case, the King himself goes into battle. Lying behind Calvin's thought are all the biblical passages that point to the Messiah as a descendant of King David. Edmondson explains: "The office of the king was to rule, protect, and provide for the welfare of God's people, and David fulfilled this office with aplomb during his reign. By doing so, David took God's part in God's relationship with the people."¹⁰ Battling with sin, death, and evil is the work of a divine king to protect his people. This is what Christ does in his kingly work.

⁹ *Institutes* 2.12.2 (1:466).

¹⁰ Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology*, 63.

The Westminster Confession draws attention to Christ as victorious king under the rubric of “Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience,” the title of chapter 20 in the Confession. Paragraph one of that chapter reads:

The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law. But, under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.¹¹

The work of Christ is construed not simply or only as a form of penal substitution but in the language of *Christus Victor*: he delivers from guilt and dominion of sin, from bondage to Satan, from the present evil world, from the sting of death, etc. The king sets us free while drawing our obedience to himself—a willing obedience characterized by “childlike love and a willing mind.” In other words, the freedom Christ brings by his royal action is neither an abstract notion nor an absolute human freedom but a freedom from sin and misery and the gift of a clear conscience that delights in obedience to God. This is the holy freedom of “slavery” to God’s righteousness, a “slavery” that leads to true joy and contentment.¹²

An important point to bear in mind is that the victory Christ achieves is not a vague “cosmic victory” nor is it to be juxtaposed against a penal substitutionary atonement. Horton makes a helpful observation:

¹¹ Westminster Confession of Faith in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

¹² See Romans 6:12-23.

Where Aulen's heavy typecasting tended to set sacrifice and conquest in opposition, a covenantal approach as suggested here at least would seek their integration. Furthermore, it would give more concrete form to the cosmic conquest by orienting it to the progress of redemption in history, rather than leaving it hanging in the air. Apocalyptic, which is the genre in which we find most of the references to conquest over the powers, is not an otherworldly preoccupation, but rather a description of this world as it becomes the theater of a heavenly battle. It is analogical revelation in the fullest sense, expressing the inexpressible in terms drawn from everyday life.¹³

Without relinquishing sacrifice as a dimension of Christ's atoning work, royal conquest forms a concomitant dimension of the atonement. The two are not mutually exclusive or contradictory. Furthermore, the concept of cosmic conquest requires more specificity, which Horton insists, is best accomplished in a covenantal framework. That is to say, the framework of promises made by God to his people determines what Christ accomplishes as the victorious king. In Reformed thought, those promises set up four primary ways in which Christ fulfills his warrior-king role: the subjugation of Satan and his cohort, the conquest of sin, the destruction of death, and the establishment of God's lordship over all.

The Subjugation of Satan and the Powers

Writing about the concept of redemption from the power of sin, Murray explains that it is in that discussion "that we may properly reflect upon the bearing of redemption upon Satan."¹⁴ The power of sin is the aspect of fallen human nature that draws the individual to pursue and engage in acts, thoughts, and speech that

¹³ Michael S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 243.

¹⁴ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), 49.

are contrary to God's law. Humans not only inherited the guilt of sin from Adam but also the pollution of sin. Their concupiscence gives rise to weakness, which, all too often in the face of temptation, leads to sin; hence, the need to remove sources of temptation. Not only is Satan the deceiver, he is the great tempter at work from the beginning of human existence in the Garden of Eden. With respect to the Garden, Murray notes, "It is surely significant in this connection that the first promise of redemptive grace, the first beam of redemptive light that fell upon our fallen first parents, was in terms of the destruction of the tempter."¹⁵ Thus, from the inception of redemptive grace, salvation was intended to remove the power of outside forces that would draw or entice humans away from God and the truly good. In this case, that outside force is Satan.

Jansen argues that "Calvin's most recurrent theme" with regard to Christ's reign is the theme of "the regal conquest of Christ over the devil, death, and sin."¹⁶ He draws attention to this line of thought in Calvin's corpus by noting, for example, Calvin's comments on Matt 12:29, in which Calvin writes, "Now this kind of redemption Christ shows to be necessary, in order to wrench from the devil, by main force, what He will never quit till He is compelled. By these words He informs us, that it is vain for men to expect deliverance, till Satan has been subdued by a violent struggle."¹⁷ The devil must be bested and removed from power; otherwise,

¹⁵ Ibid, 49.

¹⁶ John F. Jansen, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Work of Christ* (London: James Clarke and Co., 1956), 88.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Calvin's Commentaries 16, trans. William Pringle (n.d., repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), 2:72. Matthew 12:29 reads, "Or how can someone enter a

he will continue exerting force in opposition to humankind's best interests. But it is not Satan alone who is conquered by Christ. The powers and principalities of the world, too, are subdued by the same stroke. Letham puts it this way: "The atonement is also the occasion by which Christ conquers the rebellious principalities and powers, the demonic world headed by Satan."¹⁸

Even if one considers its invisibility to the human eye, this demonic world manifests its existence in the sufferings and miseries of life. The world in a moral-ethical sense, in the sense of its primary orientation, stands opposed to God and is ruled by "the god of this world," as the Apostle Paul puts it.¹⁹ The combination of humankind's own sinfulness with the existence of principalities and powers of darkness led by the devil culminates in a world of brokenness, strife, suffering, and oppression. Human flourishing and culture are hampered because of the bondage to the powers and principalities. Christ's victory over Satan and his cohort deals the decisive blow to transform this situation. As Sherman explains, "Christ's victory as king over the principalities and powers reclaims creation, which is to say, the 'natural,' and those born from a now fallen nature, for God the Father's original purposes." This means that the "conditions needed for reclaiming and reconciliation of human culture"²⁰ through Christ's work as priest and prophet are established.

strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man?" (ESV).

¹⁸ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1993), 149-50.

¹⁹ See 2 Corinthians 4:4.

²⁰ Robert Sherman, *King, Priest, and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of Atonement*, Theology for the Twenty-First Century (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 160.

Christ's subjugation of Satan and the powers is also to be regarded as an act of judgment and condemnation. Horton:

There is no way of getting around the warrior theme and its obvious references to a cosmic judgment that eventuates in cataclysmic defeat for the powers—and not just in abstraction, but in the concrete reality of political action taken against the enemies of God. There is a real and historical cleansing of God's world, not only by sympathetic suffering with, but by triumphant victory over, all who have set their faces against YHWH and his Messiah.²¹

The king, as upholder of justice and righteousness, is also the judge who condemns those who are guilty and who do not turn away from wickedness. Christ's shepherding care as an expression of God's fatherly kindness and as a blessing of the kingdom extends only to the penitent who submit to Christ. All others face Christ as the righteous judge who leaves no evil unpunished. Thus Calvin writes, "So then, the kingdom of Christ extends, no doubt, to all men; but it brings salvation to none but the elect, who with voluntary obedience follow the voice of the Shepherd; for others are compelled by violence to obey Him, till at length He utterly bruise them with his iron sceptre."²² This bruising judgment took place in a decisive manner at the cross of Christ. As Letham explains:

This theme [the bruising of the seed of the serpent] is taken up by our Lord himself. He draws attention to the prince of this world being cast out of heaven and, in the same breath, to himself being lifted up so as to draw all people to him (Jn. 12:31-33). Here the connection between the cross and the overthrow of Satan is clear. Paul too sees the cross as being an open display of victory over the principalities and powers, whereby their power was disarmed (Col. 2:14-15).²³

²¹ Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 243.

²² John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Calvin's Commentaries 18, trans. William Pringle (n.d., repr., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), 165-6.

²³ Letham, *Work of Christ*, 150.

The work at the cross is the condemnation and destruction of Satan. Complete as it is, there is yet to come the final judgment when the destruction is perfected, so to speak, when it is brought to its culmination. Thus, the work of Christ the king as judge took place in the past, is continuing in the present, and will end at Christ's return in the future. Horton reminds us, "No longer is the kingdom merely typological, a clash of swords and warhorses, but the future reign of God actually dawns in this present age. Jesus says he has come to cast out Satan."²⁴ As the reign has dawned, so it will also be brought to perfection in the end. Once again, Jansen on Calvin:

As is His kingly reign, Christ's judgment is both present and future. He conquered the powers of evil in His cross. He continues to conquer them through the gospel which, while gracious to the church, is a rod of iron to His enemies. He will conquer at the last and will then vindicate His triumph in the final judgment. "God's sacred barn-floor will not be perfectly cleansed before the last day, when Christ at His coming will cast out the chaff; but, He has already begun to do this by the doctrine of His gospel...."²⁵

The final judgment is an act of condemnation by Christ the king exercising his legal, judicial authority.

John 12:31-33 reads, "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die" (ESV). The link between Christ's death and judgment in this passage cannot be missed. The work he does at the cross is as the royal judge so that Satan is cast out of God's realm. Horton directs attention to a paradox here: "The 'lifting up' is

²⁴ Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 245.

²⁵ Jansen, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Work of Christ*, 92-3. The quote he uses is from Calvin's commentary on Psalm 15:1.

paradoxical: simultaneously humiliation and exaltation.”²⁶ Christ is suffering like a common Roman criminal, displayed before the world with the sign placed sarcastically above his head by Pilate: “King of the Jews.” What Pilate didn’t realize is that his words were the truth. Christ was the warrior king and judge as he was hanging on the cross “defeating the powers that hold us (and in our wake, all of creation) in bondage to sin, despair, and death.”²⁷ Horton goes on to explain: “While Satan promised him a glorious kingdom of power here and now, avoiding the cross, Jesus embraced the cross precisely as a king embraces a scepter. Or, to change the metaphor slightly, Jesus is *enthroned on a cross*.”²⁸

Christ the King as divine warrior and judge, condemns and defeats once for all Satan and his cohorts. The significance of this victorious judgment will become clearer when we consider how Christ, in his ongoing kingly work, mediates the benefits of this victory to his people. For now, as I briefly alluded to above, this victory is victory over the one who seeks to tempt humanity and draw them away from God and his righteousness. This is one way in which Christ preserves and supports his people “under all their temptations and sufferings” as well as “restraining and overcoming all their enemies.”²⁹

²⁶ Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 254.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁹ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 45 in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

Christus Victor: The Demise of Sin

The victory over Satan is not the only victory that Christ wins through his life, death, and resurrection. As I have argued, the victory over Satan affects his power to tempt to sin so that, on one level, the condemnation of Satan is at the same time the condemnation and victory over sin. However, Satan is not the explanation for all the sin of human beings. They have the problem of indwelling sin within themselves and this sin and its power, too, must be destroyed.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism describes the sinful state of fallen humans as consisting “in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called *original sin*; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it.”³⁰ Reformed thought, as is evident in the Catechism, customarily distinguishes between two aspects of sin: its guilt and its power—the latter being associated with concupiscence and the pollution of sin. Guilt is understood as a judicial status requiring a judicial acquittal and the constitution of a righteous status in the form of forgiveness of sin and justification. The pollution of sin, on the other hand, requires “deliverance from the enslaving defilement and power of sin.”³¹ Arguably, justification is inseparable from royal action as it represents both the forgiveness of sin—release from its guilt—and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness—a royal gift of right standing with the King. Both the release from guilt and the gift of righteousness are a form of judicial or forensic action and therefore royal acts. In

³⁰ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 18 in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

³¹ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 46.

this case, Christ as King is both judge and advocate for his people. As he condemns sin on the cross, he at the same time guarantees the righteousness of his people by accomplishing this royal work.

Christ's kingly victory in relation to sin is especially evident in the fact that he overcomes the power of sin for his people. His redemptive work establishes a decisive break with sin: "Redemption from the *power* of sin may be called the triumphal aspect of redemption. In his finished work Christ did something once for all respecting the power of sin and it is in virtue of this victory which he secured that the power of sin is broken in all those who are united to him."³² This is a way of saying that Christ not only gained forgiveness for us through his work "but our holiness, transferring us to God's kingdom and breaking the power of sin over us."³³ Removing us from our bondage to the power of sin, Christ establishes himself as our King, placing us in his kingdom and thereby effecting a change in our allegiance and manner of life. In the work of Christ, the foundation was laid for sanctification, the progressive transformation of Christ's people into his image and the mortification of sin in their lives.³⁴ Jansen explains with respect to Calvin:

We may add that its [the atonement] character as a royal conquest over sin has important implications for Christian life, for it points us beyond unresolved tension and dialectic conflict towards a positive and victorious life. "We have need that the death and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ should produce its fruit in us." We are not only forgiven; we are to share in the conquest of sin.³⁵

³² Ibid., 48.

³³ Letham, *Work of Christ*, 149.

³⁴ The Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 35 defines sanctification as "the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness."

³⁵ Jansen, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Work of Christ*, 90.

The conquest of sin has as its corollary the restoration of righteousness and the establishment of justice. I've already alluded to the relationship between Christ's royal conquest of sin and sanctification in the life of the individual. But, Christ's victory over sin is also constitutive of his kingdom as a whole, a kingdom in which righteousness dwells and in which the scepter of the king is the scepter of righteousness.³⁶ In answer to question 191 regarding the second petition of the Lord's Prayer, the Westminster Larger Catechism explains that, when praying, "Thy kingdom come," we are praying "that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed" to the end that "Christ would rule in our hearts here, and hasten the time of his second coming, and our reigning with him forever...." The destruction of Satan's kingdom is no less than the establishment of Christ's kingdom. Horton writes, "Where there is no righteousness, there can be no blessing but only judgment...He [Christ] comes not only to atone for injustice, but to establish justice throughout the earth (Num. 14:21; 1 Sam. 2:10; Ps. 22:27; Isa. 6:3), so that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10)."³⁷ Justice and righteousness are not only conformity to God's laws but the restoration of wholeness and peace. Thus, Christ's victory over sin leads to blessing in the life of the individual believer and, ultimately, an eternal realm of perfect justice and righteousness.

³⁶ See Rom. 14:17 and Heb. 1:8.

³⁷ Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 244.

Christus Victor: Death is Dead

In 1 Cor 15, the Apostle Paul addresses an apparent denial among some in the Corinthian Church of the future resurrection. He argues that if the dead are not raised, then Christ himself also could not have been raised. To this he adds in v 14 that “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” Of course, Paul goes on to insist, “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”³⁸ From here he works his way to the crescendo of 15:50-57 to insist that death is swallowed up in victory and it is in Jesus Christ that we have this victory over death and its sting. There is no doubt that the Pauline corpus gives a central place to the resurrection of Christ. This centrality of the resurrection is a theme that, upon careful examination, is found to permeate Reformed thought as well even if it has not always been emphasized in practice.³⁹

Even as the death and sufferings of Christ provide the material for Christ’s estate of humiliation, so the resurrection and ascension provide the key components of Christ’s exaltation—an important rubric for describing Christ’s kingship. The Westminster Larger Catechism, for example, explains Christ’s exaltation in his resurrection as composed of the fact that, “the very same body in which he suffered, with the essential properties thereof,” is the one in which Christ rose from the dead and thus “vanquished death, and him that had the power of it.” In this same action, Christ also declared himself “to be the Son of God” and “Lord of the quick and

³⁸ 1 Cor 15:20 ESV.

³⁹ See Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1978).

dead.”⁴⁰ Arguably, the expressions “Son of God” and “Lord of the quick and dead” are the language of royalty since “sonship” together with “lordship” are descriptions applicable to the king in the biblical thought undergirding the Confession’s statements. It is Christ the king who overcomes death for his people.

Edmondson argues, “The most significant theme that emerges from Calvin’s exposition of the creed in relation to Christ’s kingly office is Christ’s defeat of death.”⁴¹ He explains that there are a number of pieces to Calvin’s argument. First, it is important to understand that “Christ died and gave himself over to the power of death to deliver us from our bondage to it.” Even as Christ gives himself over to death, however, he is “not overwhelmed by its power” but he himself “laid it low.”⁴² Second, with respect to the descent into hell of which the creed speaks, Calvin, according to Edmondson, understands it to refer “to his suffering the wrath of God and the concomitant terror of death to which humanity is subject because of sin.”⁴³ The suffering of God’s wrath involves a grappling “hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death.”⁴⁴ Not only is Christ’s work a victory over death, it is also a victory over our fear of death: “Again, his death is notable not only for what it accomplishes objectively, but also for what it works subjectively in Christ’s chosen; he addresses not only external enemies, like the devil, but also the

⁴⁰ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 52.

⁴¹ Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology*, 134.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.10 (1:515).

internal enemy of fear.”⁴⁵ Both death itself and our fear of it are destroyed by Christ’s death.

In the third part of Calvin’s exposition of Christ’s defeat of death, he turns to the resurrection. As Edmondson explains, “There is no victory if death is able to hold him in its ugly maw.”⁴⁶ Christ had to rise in order for death to have been vanquished. But, the resurrection is not only the defeat of death; it is also the manifestation of Christ’s victory to believers: “If in his death we see his struggle in his humanity with our fear of death, so in his resurrection we see the power of God whereby death is defeated and our faith is secured.”⁴⁷ Just as Christ frees us from the fear of death, so he also gives us assurance of his victory by his resurrection. Following this, the fourth aspect of Calvin’s exposition of Christ’s defeat of death centers on the ascension. Edmondson points out that Calvin views the ascension as the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom and that, through the ascension, “Christ is better able to exercise his beneficent lordship over the Church” because he more abundantly pours out his Spirit.⁴⁸ Not only does the ascension result in the outpouring of the Spirit in abundance, “Christ in heaven is no longer limited by his bodily presence as he wields royal power, but is now free through his spiritual presence to rule both heaven and earth more immediately.”⁴⁹

Christ’s victory over death, however, is not limited in Reformed thought strictly to victory over death proper. The victory over death is indicative of the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 134-5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 135.

wider victory over every form of degeneration and misery. With death vanquished, so is every lesser illness, disease, and the misery of fallen human existence. Letham connects this victory over death with the victory over Satan and over sin and describes the result as the abolition of death, disease, and sin:

Thirdly, Christ's victory over sin and Satan opens for us the prospect of the conquest of the various ills that have originated from those sources. Sin brought death in its wake and, with it, the decay and disease that are an endemic part of a fallen world. That is why Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God was accompanied by healing miracles and by exorcisms. They were signs that God's rule was to result in the abolition of death, disease and sin.⁵⁰

In other words, the victory over death signals the reality that Christ's work was not intended simply as some kind of ephemeral work geared merely to the soul, mind, or inner dimension of human beings but to bring about a holistic restoration. Even as God saw his handiwork in Gen 1 and described it all as "very good," he provides for the renewal and regeneration of his world. Death—the contradiction of the life God gives to creation at the beginning—once conquered signifies that God's favor and life are returning to creation. Horton likens this to the Old Testament Year of Jubilee:

So when the Baptist's disciples inquire of Jesus as to whether he is "the one who is to come," Jesus replies, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them" (Matt. 11:2-6). The King has arrived at last to conquer sin and death and to bring about the everlasting and cosmic jubilee that Moses, Joshua, and David could experience only by promise and type.⁵¹

The good news of Christ's reign is that holistic wholeness has been restored.

⁵⁰ Letham, *Work of Christ*, 151-2.

⁵¹ Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 248.

Christus Victor est Christos Kyrios

Responding to criticism from the Pharisees for healing a demon-oppressed man, Jesus says in Matt 12:28, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Christ’s victory over Satan and the powers, over sin, and over death is nothing less than the in-breaking of his kingdom. But what does the kingdom represent at heart? What is at its root and center? The answer is nothing less than the rule of God over all; and this is manifest in Christ’s very appearance: “The appearance of Christ and His Kingdom mean the same thing.”⁵² The kingdom of Christ is at the same time the kingdom of God the Father because the Father, in establishing his Son as king, did not relinquish his own royal prerogative and supremacy. Calvin explains:

We now perceive the amount of what is stated here, that the Father hath given to the Son a kingdom, that He may govern heaven and earth according to his pleasure. But this might appear to be very absurd, that the Father, surrendering his right to govern, should remain unemployed in heaven, like a private person. The answer is easy. This is said both in regard to God and to men; for no change took place in the Father, when he appointed Christ to be supreme King and Lord of heaven and earth; for he is in the Son, and works in Him. But since, when we wish to rise to God, all our senses immediately fail, Christ is placed before our eyes as a lively image of the invisible God.⁵³

In other words, the son acts as vicegerent. Sherman: “Stated even more concisely, the Son *is* king, but he is such *as* the Father’s regent, and the power he wields *is* that

⁵² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, Calvin’s Commentaries 21, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), 252. This is part of Calvin’s comment on 2 Timothy 4:1.

⁵³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Calvin’s Commentaries 17, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), 201. This is part of Calvin’s comment on John 5:22.

of the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁴ The vicegerency of Christ in no way diminishes the reality of his own kingship but it does direct attention to the establishment of God’s lordship over all creation.

“To say *Christos kyrios*,” writes Horton, “is to witness to the fact that the advent of God’s lordship visibly in history has occurred, and it is located in the person of Christ.”⁵⁵ To understand what it means to speak of Jesus as Lord, Horton goes on to say, “one must try to hear it with Jewish ears.”⁵⁶ To say Jesus is Lord is to say that the same God who saved his people from Egypt, led them through the sea and the wilderness, and brought them into the promised land, is the One who has raised Jesus from the dead. And, raising him, he has given him the name above all names. This is not merely an inner, personal experience but much more. Horton draws on Moltmann who puts it this way: “It is therefore more appropriate to present the salvation which Christ brings in ever-widening circles, beginning with the personal experience of reconciliation and ending with the reconciliation of the cosmos, heaven and earth.”⁵⁷ The reconciliation of the cosmos, including that of the individual but not restricted to it, cannot be viewed as anything less than the assertion of God’s lordship over it. For, bringing reconciliation also means bringing the creation into submission to the Creator who has the right to demand that the cosmos—human beings included—operate in accordance with his regulations bearing in mind that his regulations have as their end his glory *and* our good. The

⁵⁴ Sherman, *King, Priest, Prophet*, 117.

⁵⁵ Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 262.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁵⁷ Moltmann as quoted by Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 263.

submission to God's lordship is not submission to a cruel master or wicked king, on the contrary, it is to understand and experience true *shalom*.

Royal Mediation Applied

Given the victorious work of Christ with respect to Satan and the powers, sin, death, and his triumphant establishment of the lordship of God over all, how does all this benefit the recipients of God's grace? How do the recipients actually receive what Christ has gained for them? In other words, how do we go from Christ's accomplishment of victory to his application of it to the church? The connecting piece between Christ's victories and his church is found in at least two further realities associated with Christ's royal office. The first is that Christ the King is also at the same time Christ the Head of the church. In other words, kingship and headship are intertwining concepts and, even though some distinctions can be made between them, they are to be viewed as manifestations of Christ's office as king. Christ the Head of the church directly blesses his people. Second, Christ as Head and King, in his role of granting blessings, provides both servant officers through whom he manifests and provides his royal beneficence to the church until his return and to whom he gives tools for doing his work. With regard to tools, I am especially thinking here of church discipline.

Christ's Kingship as Headship

Louis Berkhof distinguishes between Christ's spiritual kingship and his kingship over the whole universe. He defines the spiritual kingship as that which is exercised over the kingdom of grace (*regnum gratiae*), which kingdom is equated with the church. In equating the church with the kingdom, he echoes a point made in the Westminster Confession: "The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: *and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ* [emphasis mine], the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."⁵⁸ For whatever else might be included in a Reformed conception of Christ's kingdom, with respect to grace, the kingdom is the church. Distinguished from the spiritual kingdom is Christ's kingdom of power (*regnum potentiae*).⁵⁹ Of this kingdom, Berkhof writes, "By the *regnum potentiae* we mean the dominion of the God-man, Jesus Christ, over the universe, His providential and judicial administration of all things in the interest of the Church. As King of the universe the Mediator so guides the destinies of individuals, of social groups, and of nations, as to promote the growth, the gradual purification, and the final perfection of the people which He has

⁵⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith 25.2 in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994).

⁵⁹ Alternatively, we find Turretin using the phrase "natural kingdom" or "essential kingdom" to indicate this same rule of Christ over the cosmos. See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2:486-90, topic 14, quest. 16. Hodge also makes reference to the kingdom of glory to indicate the state of Christ's kingdom in the eschaton. See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871-3; repr., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979), 2:608.

redeemed by His blood.”⁶⁰ In other words, Christ’s kingdom of power is the manifestation of his divine sovereignty in exercising rule, power, and authority that affects all creation. The *regnum potentiae*, as is obvious from Berkhof’s description, is the rule of Christ exercised for the benefit and blessing of those belonging to the *regnum gratiae*. As a matter of fact, Berkhof will go so far as to say that Christ’s kingship over the universe “is subservient to His Spiritual kingship.”⁶¹

Part of the basis for Berkhof’s description of Christ’s rule over the *regnum gratiae* as a spiritual kingship is that “The spiritual nature of this kingship is indicated, among others, by the fact that Christ is repeatedly called the Head of the Church [in the Scriptures].”⁶² Not only is this the case, but Berkhof notes, “in some cases [the term head] is practically equivalent to ‘King’ (Head in a figurative sense, one clothed with authority)....”⁶³ In other words, headship and kingship are intertwined concepts. The equation of kingship with headship extends beyond Christ’s headship of the church. Van Gemeren and Velema assert that both in his capacity as the Sovereign over the *regnum gratiae* and the *regnum potentiae*, Christ is called “Head.” They put it this way:

Christ, who now sits at the right hand of God, as Head of all that is, has been given to his church, which is his body (Eph. 1:20-23). He is also the Head of

⁶⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 410.

⁶¹ Ibid, 410. Also see Turretin, *Institutes* 14.16 (2:486-90). For a recent, fuller discussion of this point, see A. Craig Troxel, “The World is Not Enough: The Priority of the Church in Christ’s Cosmic Headship,” *Confident of Better Things: Essays Commemorating Seventy-Five Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. John R. Muether and Danny E. Olinger (Willow Grove, Pa.: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2011), 337-65.

⁶² Ibid., 406.

⁶³ Ibid., 406.

the church (Col. 1:18; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 19). He is therefore the Head of the church as well as the cosmos....⁶⁴

Thus, the concept of Christ's headship is indicative of his rule and governance both of the cosmos as a whole as well as the church. With reference to the Apostles' Creed, Heidelberg Catechism Q. 50 reads:

Q. 50. *Why is there added: "And sits at the right hand of God?"*

A. Because Christ ascended into heaven so that he might manifest himself there as the Head of his Church, through whom the Father governs all things.⁶⁵

Christ is Head of the church. As such, however, he governs all things—his headship over the cosmos.

There is a difference, however, between Christ's headship of the church and his headship over all creation. In the case of the former, headship is exercised in love for the eternal benefit of the beloved. In the latter, the headship accentuates "pure" dominion and rule. The previous quote from Van Gemeren and Velema continues this way:

He is therefore the Head of the church as well as the cosmos (Du Plessis, 1962), but there is a difference. The church is his body, while the cosmos is not. His dominion over the church is a qualified dominion. He rules it in love. From the perspective of the church it is a relationship of complete dependence and loving communion.⁶⁶

In a codified Reformed form, Heidelberg Catechism Q. 51 stands behind Van Gemeren's and Velema's statement:

⁶⁴ J. Van Gemeren and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Gerrit Bilkes and Ed M. van der Maas (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 502.

⁶⁵ Heidelberg Catechism in Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 502.

Q. 51. *What benefit do we receive from this glory of Christ, our Head?*

A. First, that through his Holy Spirit he pours out heavenly gifts upon us, his members. Second, that by his power he defends and supports us against all our enemies.

The church receives the gift and gifts of the Holy Spirit as well as Christ's defense and support. This is where Christ's sovereign power and headship over the *regnum potentiae* is aimed to benefit all who belong to the *regnum gratiae*.

Whereas the Heidelberg Catechism attributes the blessings from Christ to his headship, the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms subsume these benefits clearly under Christ's office as king.

Q. 45. How doth Christ execute the office of a king?

A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them; in bestowing saving grace upon his elect, rewarding their obedience, and correcting them for their sins, preserving and supporting them under all their temptations and sufferings, restraining and overcoming all their enemies, and powerfully ordering all things for his own glory, and their good; and also in taking vengeance on the rest, who know not God, and obey not the gospel.⁶⁷

Q. 26. How doth Christ execute the office of a king?

A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.⁶⁸

Given the clear parallel between kingship and headship, we can fairly conclude that the benefits from Christ to his church can be described or discussed under either rubric. This is an important point because, as indicated in the two catechetical traditions represented here—Westminster and Heidelberg—the work of Christ's royal office may be represented under the form of his headship. Edmondson gives

⁶⁷ Westminster Larger Catechism.

⁶⁸ Westminster Shorter Catechism.

considerable attention to this in Calvin's corpus identifying five images of Christ's headship yet categorizing them under Christ's kingly office.⁶⁹ As a matter of fact, in describing what he seeks to do in his chapter on Christ as king in Calvin's thought, Edmondson notes, "The key to this organizational task is the recognition that what Calvin says of about [*sic*] Christ as head of the Church is of a piece with his discussion of Christ's royal office."⁷⁰

The one exception to this equation of king and head may be the mystical union of believers with Christ. Each believer is united with Christ the head of the church. Such union with Christ does not obliterate his rule and authority over the believer and the church as his body. Without diminishing or violating Christ's rule over believers, even biblical passages that address the mystical union do so with royal language so that the union is a union bringing royal benefits.⁷¹ Edmondson's exposition of Calvin is again helpful on this point: "Insofar as Christ has united himself to us, we share with him not in a metaphysical union of natures or persons, but in a fellowship (*societas*) whereby he shares with us the good things that he won for those who place their faith in him."⁷² In the next paragraph he adds:

Calvin's notion of the unity between Christ and the believer is, in the first place, social. It is a relationship established between persons, a benefactor and those who place themselves in fellowship with him through faith, so that they might receive his benefits and be those who move within his company. His view is not unlike the image we have of Christ, sitting at table with his

⁶⁹ The five images are Christ as our brother, as beloved of the Father, as Lord, as fountain of life, and as the pattern for our life. Each of these metaphors has implications for blessings to Christ's people. See Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology*, 118-31.

⁷⁰ Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology*, 117.

⁷¹ See, for example, Ephesians 2:6 and Colossians 3:1.

⁷² Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology*, 140.

disciples and asking that they might be one with him even as he is one with the Father.⁷³

So, Christ's headship in the union with believers is such that he is royal benefactor lavishing the gifts of God's good grace upon his people.

In the two questions and answers quoted above from the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, we're left with no doubt that Christ's royal office not only gains salvation through his victory, as I argued in the first part of this chapter, but is responsible for granting the benefits of his meritorious work to the church. As we've seen with Christ's prophetic and priestly offices, all his work is *pro nobis*, for our benefit. With respect to the royal office, the benefit begins with the very existence of the church. No King, no church. As Horton expresses it, "There is a church because there is one who stood in his resurrected flesh and declared, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...' (Mt 28:18-19)."⁷⁴ The first work of Christ the king—a work of grace—is found "in calling out of the world a people to himself."⁷⁵ Christ the king establishes his beneficent reign over a people he designates his very own. Van Gemeren and Velema observe, "We confess that he is an eternal King, who cannot go without subjects."⁷⁶ Similarly, Edmondson notes about Calvin:

Through his death, resurrection, and ascension, Christ inaugurated his kingdom, but that accounts for only a portion of his work. For this kingdom would be of no avail unless there were citizens to populate it. Thus, Christ

⁷³ Ibid., 140.

⁷⁴ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 521.

⁷⁵ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 45.

⁷⁶ Van Gemeren and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 506.

needed to gather God's chosen into the realm over which he had established himself so that they might enjoy his royal beneficence.⁷⁷

In other words, the royal office of Christ mediates God's grace to the church foundationally demonstrated in the very existence of the church. The fact that the church exists, a work done by Christ the king, is evidence that the king is mediating grace to his people.

The work of Christ the king does not end with his calling a people to himself. It extends to a range of protective and preserving activities as well as progress in the holiness of his people. With reference to Christ's mediatorial kingdom (*regnum gratiae*), Turretin explains that this kingdom is part of the fulfillment of Christ's mediation and, in particular, the conservation or preservation of all the blessings of Christ's total mediation. In the eschaton, the other two aspects of mediation, the acquisition of salvation and its application, having been fully fulfilled, will no longer be necessary. "But," Turretin goes on to say, "we treat of its conservation, in reference to which we contend that Christ will perpetually conserve the blessings obtained for us and so will reign forever over his church."⁷⁸ It is part of Christ's reign as king to maintain for his people all the blessings he has gained through redemption accomplished and applied. He calls a people to himself and then he sees to it that they are protected and kept as his people.

As the Westminster Larger Catechism indicated, Christ's preservation and protection of his people extends to protection from enemies without but also from themselves in the face of their temptations. It recognizes the problem of the

⁷⁷ Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology*, 136.

⁷⁸ Turretin, *Institutes* 14.17.3 (2:491).

pollution of sin which I briefly addressed earlier. This problem requires Christ the king to correct his people for their faults besides supporting them in the face of all their temptations. The dual work of support in temptation and chastisement and correction for error is part of the process of growth in sanctification, sanctification being defined as “the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”⁷⁹ As a matter of fact, in its description of Christ's office as king, the Westminster Shorter Catechism describes the execution of the office to include “subduing us to himself.” This subjugation results in the death of sin and the coming to life of righteousness in fulfillment of Christ's kingly work of establishing justice discussed earlier. Another way to view this is to say that the king sets the laws of his kingdom and empowers his subjects to obey them. Speaking of the laws of the kingdom, Hodge remarks, “The laws of the kingdom moreover require not only these duties to Christ [faith in him, obedience to him, and worship of him], but that his people should be holy in heart and life...In one word, they are required to be like Christ, in disposition, character, and conduct.”⁸⁰ The work of the king enables his subjects to conform to his image.

It is well to recall that sanctification, even though it results in the transformation of human beings—that is to say it is subjective, a work accomplished in us—is still entirely from God's grace. In distinction from justification—a punctiliar act of God—sanctification is a work, an ongoing process reaching its termination only at death or at Christ's return, whichever occurs first. Nevertheless,

⁷⁹ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 35.

⁸⁰ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:603.

its source, power, and perfection always come from God not us. Therefore, it is designated as grace. This is a grace manifested and applied by Christ in virtue of his threefold office. Viewed from the perspective of the mortification of sin, sanctification is the work of Christ as King applying his victory over sin to us. In this we see the connection between *Christus Victor* as the destruction of sin and its benefit to Christ's people.

Christ's royal work is not exhausted for the individual believer in the reality of sanctification. As we saw above, the Westminster Larger Catechism speaks of Christ's preservation and support of believers not only with respect to temptation but sufferings as well. And, the Catechism indicated that Christ the king powerfully orders everything for the good of his people. Just as sanctification answers to Christ's victory over sin, so his kingly care in the midst of his people's suffering, as well as his ordering of all things for their good, answers to his victory over death. The victory over death, it is well to recall, includes not simply death but every lesser form of illness, disease, pain, lack, and agony. Therefore, as king, Christ cares for the material and temporal needs of his people.

Christ's Ongoing Kingship and Church Office

At this point, the question is, where and how do we see Christ actually providing the blessings discussed in the foregoing? Other than the tangible existence of the church, composed as it is of human beings, how does Christ the king implement the protection, provision, and preservation of his people? On one level, we might answer that he does so "behind the scenes," as it were. His protective

power, his battle against principalities and powers, his overarching superintendence of all of life are all at work in accordance with his promises to his people whether we recognize them or not. We can attribute every good blessing to this work of Christ the king. As Sherman observes about kings of Israel, “the king was to serve and foster the well-being of the people as a whole,”⁸¹ so the same applies to Christ. By his sovereign power, now diffused through the work of the Spirit because of his ascension, as Calvin puts it, Christ is affecting all of history in order to bless those who are his own. As the concern of the current project is on the way God ministers his grace through the church, where and how do we see Christ the king at work in that location? The answer is through the officers he gives to the church.

Question 53 of the Westminster Larger Catechism asks, “How is Christ exalted in his ascension?” Part of the answer given is that Christ, “in our nature, and as our head, triumphing over enemies visibly went up into the highest heavens, there to receive gifts for men.” The gifts he receives for us, as indicated in the answer to the next question of the Catechism, Christ pours out upon his church through the Holy Spirit as he “furnisheth his ministers and people with gifts and graces” or, as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, “through his Holy Spirit he pours out heavenly gifts upon us, his members.”⁸² The gifts given have been recognized by the Reformed tradition not only to include abilities, skills, talents or other like characteristics but the offices of the church as well. With regard to the impact of the ascension, Horton writes, “The consequence is that he has now, through his Spirit,

⁸¹ Sherman, *King, Priest, Prophet*, 139.

⁸² Heidelberg Catechism Q. 51.

poured out his gifts on his people, establishing the various offices of the church for the edification of the saints and the swelling of their ranks (Eph. 4:7-13).⁸³ Van Gemeren and Velema state simply, “Offices and ministries are gifts of the exalted Christ to his church on earth.”⁸⁴ The Westminster Larger Catechism associates this giving of offices with Christ’s office as king: “Christ executeth the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them.”⁸⁵ It is through these officers that Christ manifests his royal care of his people because the offices exist to build up the body of the church not only in drawing new people to Christ through gospel proclamation but by seeing to the growth in faith, life, and character of individual believers. The growth takes place because God’s grace is brought to bear upon each believer through the ministry of the offices.

Before describing how each office manifests Christ’s kingship, it will be helpful to provide a summary recap of Christ’s royal accomplishment. In the first part of this chapter, addressing the *Christus Victor* theme, I argued that there are four parts to Christ’s kingly work in atonement: 1) victory over Satan and the powers; 2) victory over sin; 3) victory over death; and 4) the establishment of God’s lordship over all things. In part two, I presented some trajectories for the way in which Christ applies the benefits of his victory and reign to his people as he is the head of his church. The application of benefits begins with Christ’s calling out a people to be his own and extends to his care, protection, preservation, and provision

⁸³ Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 266.

⁸⁴ Van Gemeren and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 505.

⁸⁵ Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 45.

for them along with seeing to their development into his image. A reasonable summary of parts one and two would be to say that Christ exercises his royal office as a warrior shepherd. The warrior protects and preserves, while the shepherd guides and provides. In Reformed perspective, the work of the officers of the church can be construed in this same way: they bring Christ's victory to bear in the daily life of God's people in this age by protecting and preserving, the warrior task, and by guiding in paths of righteousness along with seeing to temporal needs, the shepherd task.

In the final section of this chapter, I will describe the how both the warrior work and shepherd work of Christ the king is evident in church office in the offices of pastor and elder. Following this, I will give attention to the diaconal office which especially draws attention to the shepherding ministry of provision.

Before proceeding, a brief word with respect to ordained offices is in order. Anything that is said about the duties, responsibilities, and authority of the ruling elder and deacon always automatically also applies to the pastoral office except that the given duties, etc. are not necessarily central to the pastoral office nor part of its focal or primary work. In other words, the central, defining work of the office of pastor is the ministry of word and sacrament but that does not negate its authority in ruling, governing, and shepherding the church. The shepherding function in particular is highlighted by the very title "pastor." In Reformed thought, there is a sense in which the pastoral office encompasses all office in the church. For example, the Second Helvetic Confession describes the responsibilities of ministers as follows:

The Duties of Ministers. The duties of ministers are various; yet for the most part they are restricted to two, in which all the rest are comprehended: to the teaching of the Gospel of Christ, and to the proper administration of the sacraments. For it is the duty of the ministers to gather together an assembly for worship in which to expound God's Word and to apply the whole doctrine to the care and use of the Church, so that what is taught may benefit the hearers and edify the faithful. It falls to ministers, I say, to teach the ignorant, and to exhort; and to urge the idlers and lingerers to make progress in the way of the Lord. Moreover, they are to comfort and to strengthen the fainthearted, and to arm them against the manifold temptations of Satan; to rebuke offenders; to recall the erring into the way; to raise the fallen; to convince the gainsayers to drive the wolf away from the sheepfold of the Lord; to rebuke wickedness and wicked men wisely and severely; not to wink at nor to pass over great wickedness. And, besides, they are to administer the sacraments, and to commend the right use of them, and to prepare all men by wholesome doctrine to receive them; to preserve the faithful in a holy unity; and to check schisms; to catechize the unlearned, *to commend the needs of the poor to the Church* [emphasis mine], to visit, instruct, and keep in the way of life the sick and those afflicted with various temptations. In addition, they are to attend to public prayers of supplications in times of need, together with common fasting, that is, a holy abstinence; and as diligently as possible to see to everything that pertains to the tranquility, peace and welfare of the churches.

But in order that the minister may perform all these things better and more easily, it is especially required of him that he fear God, be constant in prayer, attend to spiritual reading, and in all things and at all times be watchful, and by a purity of life to let his light to shine before all men.

Discipline. And since discipline is an absolute necessity in the Church and excommunication was once used in the time of the early fathers, and there were ecclesiastical judgments among the people of God, wherein this discipline was exercised by wise and godly men, *it also falls to ministers to regulate this discipline* [emphasis mine] for edification, according to the circumstances of the time, public state, and necessity. At all times and in all places the rule is to be observed that everything is to be done for edification, decently and honorably, without oppression and strife. For the apostle testifies that authority in the Church was given to him by the Lord for building up and not for destroying (II Cor. 10:8). And the Lord himself forbade the weeds to be plucked up in the Lord's field, because there would be danger lest the wheat also be plucked up with it (Matt. 13:29 f.).⁸⁶

Notice how ministers are charged not only with the ministry of word and sacrament but also with regulating the exercise of discipline and with bringing the needs of the

⁸⁶ Second Helvetic Confession 18 in Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

poor to the attention of the Church. Discipline, including the broader shepherding of the church, is the work of the elders while the ministry of mercy that of deacons. Nevertheless, anything said about their duties will be within the authority and purview of pastors as well even though pastoral focus is on word and sacrament. The reverse, however, is not true. What is said of pastors does not necessarily apply to elders or deacons.

The distinguishing features of the pastoral office have been highlighted in chapters two and three. There, I argued that the pastoral office is a manifestation of Christ's prophetic and priestly offices. In the prophetic dimension, associated with apocalyptic, the pastor manifests the presence of Christ through his ministry of the word. And, through that word ministry is used to bring the church into existence since the church is *creatura verbi*. In the priestly dimension, the ministry of the word is again central as the means by which Christ, through the pastors, teaches and instructs his people. At the same time, the priestly dimension of Christ's work is evident in pastoral ministry in the administration of the sacraments, the leadership of and blessings given in public worship, and in the pastor's responsibility to pray with and for the flock of Christ. The pastor's work, however, is not complete in the ministry of word, sacrament, and prayer. To that work is added governance and rule and, as a further aspect of his ministry of the word, protection of the flock. Since pastoral governance and rule as part of the service of the warrior overlap with the work of the elder, I first will address the unique aspect of the pastor's work in the public word-ministry for protecting Christ's people. Then, I will continue with the joint work of pastors and elders before turning to the deacons.

The Warrior Shepherds: The Offices of Pastor and Elder

As indicated in the preceding paragraph, the pastoral ministry of the word is not only a prophetic and priestly work but a royal one as well. Looked at in this way, the ministry of the word is a manifestation of Christ's rule. As in almost every aspect of Reformed thought, the word is central to rule in the church. For example, Ursinus explains that one of three functions of the kingly office of Christ is "to rule the church by his word and Spirit."⁸⁷ Similarly, Calvin makes the point of Christ's exclusive right to rule his church, which he exercises through his word: "He alone should rule and reign in the church as well as have authority or pre-eminence in it, and this authority should be exercised and administered by his Word alone."⁸⁸ Similar statements by Reformed theologians and in Reformed confessions can be multiplied. In sum, the emphasis on Christ's rule by his word is the heart of the Protestant commitment to the principle *sola scriptura*.

The rule of the word, however, is not exercised independently of the office to which the proclamation of the word has been entrusted. In his commentary on Ephesians 4, Calvin writes, "He [Paul] commends the external ministry of the Word from the usefulness which it yields. The sum of it is that because the Gospel is preached by certain men appointed to that office, this is the economy by which the Lord wishes to govern His Church, that it may remain safe in the world, and

⁸⁷ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (1852; repr., Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.), 176.

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.3.1 (2:1053).

ultimately obtain its complete perfection.”⁸⁹ The governance of the church by the word is accomplished especially by the preaching of the word of Christ. Even when Calvin speaks of Christ’s exclusive rule by the word, he associates it with preaching:

Now we must speak of the order by which the Lord willed his church to be governed. He alone should rule and reign in the church as well as have authority or pre-eminence in it, and this authority should be exercised and administered by his Word alone. Nevertheless, because he does not dwell among us in visible presence [Matt. 26:11, we have said that he uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work—just as a workman uses a tool to do his work.⁹⁰

Calvin’s perspective is echoed in the Second Helvetic Confession’s statement that when the “Word of God is preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful.”⁹¹ By its service to the Word of Christ, the pastoral office engages in governing the church by proclaiming and teaching the will of God revealed in Scripture. In this way, all authority and true governance is kept where it belongs with the Head and King of the church, Jesus Christ.

Pastors manifest Christ’s kingly office in word ministry not only by proclaiming and instructing in Christ’s will but by making certain that their preaching and teaching includes admonition and warning. Part of Christ’s kingly work is to protect his people. He has won the decisive victory through the cross and in his resurrection. Now, he protects as pastors warn Christ’s people of the dangers

⁸⁹ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, translated by T. H. L. Parker, edited by D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965) 178.

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.3.1 (2:1053).

⁹¹ Second Helvetic Confession 1.

of false doctrine and erroneous paths. This is a charge expressly made to pastors with respect to their work of preaching. The Westminster Assembly, in *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, expects that preaching will include warning and specific application of biblical teaching to the lives of the people of the church. Thus, it directs how this is to be done:

He is not to rest in general doctrine, although never so much cleared and confirmed, but to bring it home to special use, by application to his hearers: which albeit it prove a work of great difficulty to himself, requiring much prudence, zeal, and meditation, and to the natural and corrupt man will be very unpleasant; yet he is to endeavour to perform it in such a manner, that his auditors may feel the word of God to be quick and powerful, and a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart; and that, if any unbeliever or ignorant person be present, he may have the secrets of his heart made manifest, and give glory to God.

.....

In confutation of false doctrines, he is neither to raise an old heresy from the grave, nor to mention a blasphemous opinion unnecessarily: but, if the people be in danger of an error, he is to confute it soundly, and endeavour to satisfy their judgments and consciences against all objections.

.....

In dehortation, reprehension, and publick admonition, (which require special wisdom,) let him, as there shall be cause, not only discover the nature and greatness of the sin, with the misery attending it, but also shew the danger his hearers are in to be overtaken and surprised by it, together with the remedies and best way to avoid it.⁹²

Notice in the first part of this quote that application of the word is to be made with respect to the lives of the listeners in such a way that “his auditors may feel the word of God to be quick and powerful, and a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” This is a way of describing warning and thus the provision of protection

⁹² *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, UK: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 380.

from the errors in the life of the individual. The Directory goes on to speak of confuting error and showing the dangers the hearers are in. In a more contemporary form, the Directory for the Public Worship of God of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church describes this protective work of preaching in this way:

The preacher is to instruct his hearers in the whole counsel of God, exhort the congregation to more perfect obedience to Christ, and warn them of the sins and dangers that are around them and within them. A preacher fails to perform his task as a God-appointed watchman on Zion's walls who neglects to warn the congregation of prevalent soul-destroying teachings by enemies of the gospel.⁹³

By warning the church of the dangers and sins around and within them, the pastor is exercising the kingly warrior work of Christ as protector of his people. He is battling against falsehood and evil using the sword of the Spirit, the word of God.⁹⁴

Ruling elders, like pastors, are charged to care for the church of Christ and to engage in rule and governance. And, although they are to do so always in accordance with the word of God, they are not charged with the public proclamation of the word. Rather, they are tasked with guarding the doctrine and shepherding the way of life of the people. Calvin's description of this office in the *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances* emphasizes elders' work of watching over morals: "Their office is to have oversight of the life of everyone, to admonish amicably those whom they see to be erring or to be living a disordered life, and, where it is required, to enjoin fraternal corrections themselves and along with others."⁹⁵ However, in time

⁹³ Directory for the Public Worship of God in Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *The Book of Church Order* (Willow Grove, Pa.: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2011), 134.

⁹⁴ See also Second Helvetic Confession 18, section entitled "The Duties of Ministers".

⁹⁵ John Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. and ed. J. K. S. Reid, The Library of Christian Classics 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 62.

and in the broader Reformed tradition, the office of the elder was expanded to include more than simply the censure of morals. Governing and ruling in general have come to define the office: “As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament church provided persons with particular gifts to share in discernment of God’s Spirit and governance of God’s people...to discern and measure its [the congregation’s] fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life. Ruling elders...exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline....”⁹⁶ As is evident from this statement, although church discipline—which involves the censure of morals as well as doctrine—is included in the elders’ responsibilities, it is not the central one.

On the other hand, even during the Reformation itself, the work of discipline was viewed as more than strictly censure. The steps involved in discipline as well as the purposes of discipline indicate its usefulness not only in protecting the flock from error but for its growth in the image of Christ. Calvin’s *Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva 1537* indicates that the steps in church discipline begin, after identification of any vice needing correction, with privately admonishing “whoever it is that is at fault and to exhort him in brotherly fashion to amendment.”⁹⁷ Part of this step involved informing the ministers so that they would be involved in this admonition. Only if the guilty party persisted in error and refused to reform his ways was the case remitted for further ecclesiastical action involving public announcement and, if the persistence remained, in

⁹⁶ Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.), *Book of Order 2011/2013* (Louisville, Ky.: Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church U. S. A., 2011), 27.

⁹⁷ Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 52.

excommunication. The goal, however, was to reclaim and restore the individual. Even in the case of the excommunicated, Calvin insisted they attend worship even though barred from the Lord's Supper "in order to prove whether it will please the Saviour to touch his heart and turn him into the right path."⁹⁸ In other words, discipline is meant to lead to sanctification and thus is more than mere censure.

The breadth of discipline, and thus of the work of elders, is very evident in the work of Martin Bucer. Burnett explains that Bucer's understanding of church discipline "had four elements." The four are: "religious instruction for both children and adults; a public confession of faith and obedience, especially as part of a confirmation ceremony; fraternal admonition combined with the oversight of morals by pastors and lay elders; and in cases of grave sin, the imposition of public penance and, if necessary, excommunication."⁹⁹ As this statement makes evident, discipline is another way of speaking of the application to all of life of Christ's will. Burnett goes on to point out, "Bucer's broad definition of church discipline reflects his concern that belief should influence behavior. It was the pastor's responsibility to see that his charges understood the essentials of their faith and reflected the consequences of that faith in their actions."¹⁰⁰ Although Burnett indicates the place of pastors in this work, it has come to be seen in Reformed thought as a shared work with elders. So the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church 10.3 states:

⁹⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁹⁹ Amy Nelson Burnett, "Church Discipline and Moral Reformation in the Thought of Martin Bucer," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 22, no. 3 (1991): 445.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 453.

Ruling elders, individually and jointly with the pastor in the session, are to lead the church in the service of Christ. They are to watch diligently over the people committed to their charge to prevent corruption of doctrine or morals. Evils which they cannot correct by private admonition they should bring to the notice of the session. They should visit the people, especially the sick, instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourning, and nourish and guard the children of the covenant. They should pray with and for the people. They should have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister of the Word and help him in his labors.¹⁰¹

Elders “watch diligently...to prevent corruption of doctrine or morals,” they “instruct the ignorant,” and they “nourish and guard the children of the covenant.” Clearly, these are shepherding tasks, related to the broad conception of discipline outlined by Bucer.

I pointed out in chapter two that Reformed thought holds there to be three means of grace: word, sacraments, and prayer. The Westminster Larger Catechism puts it this way in question and answer 154:

Q. 154. What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation?

A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation.

It is not difficult to see the connection of these means of grace with the pastoral office, the ministry of word and sacrament. As I have argued in chapters two and three, the pastoral office, focused as it is on ministering the word, fulfills both a prophetic and priestly role since both prophets *and* priests are charged with word-service albeit in distinct ways. There’s a sense in which the priestly giving of

¹⁰¹ *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, Pa.: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2011), 13.

instruction from God's word can be viewed as the ongoing, day-to-day word ministry while the prophetic as more of an occasional and extraordinary form. The sacramental ministry together with intercessory prayer enlarges the scope of the pastor's fulfillment of priestly service. Thus, the pastoral office, through preaching and teaching, administration of the sacraments, and prayer, is inseparable from the means of grace.

To my mind, conspicuous for its absence from the list of means of grace is the exercise of rightful and merciful ecclesiastical discipline. Two of the designated means of grace, word and sacrament, do double-duty in Reformed thought as constitutive elements in the marks of a true church: the true preaching of the gospel and the proper administration of sacraments. As I argued in chapter two, in the Reformation era itself, there was disagreement on the number of marks—should there be one, two, or three? The Belgic Confession opted for three by including discipline as a mark in contrast to Calvin who insisted on the importance of church discipline but did not include it as a necessary mark of the church, a perspective also seen in the Westminster Confession's observation that churches can be more pure or less pure and that even the purest churches "are subject both to mixture and error."¹⁰² Yet, like Calvin, the Westminster Confession affirmed the importance of church discipline, for example, in chapter 20.4:

And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another, they who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. And, for their publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light

¹⁰² Westminster Confession of Faith 25.4 and 25.5.

of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness; or, such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the church, they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against, by the censures of the church.

If discipline is of such importance—and, on many Reformed accounts, necessary for a church to be a true church, let alone a healthy one—why is it not typically described as or designated a means of grace?

In response to this last question, two observations must be made. First, although the phrase “means of grace” is not used to describe church discipline, the Heidelberg Catechism, for example, situates discipline under the rubric of the “office of the keys”—this being a reference to the keys of the kingdom promised by Christ in Matt 16:19. The Catechism describes the office of the keys to consist in “The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline.” To this it adds, “By these two means the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers.”¹⁰³ Christian discipline, just as the preaching of the gospel, acts as a means by which the kingdom of heaven is opened and closed to individuals. The opening of the kingdom cannot be construed as anything less than the mediation of grace, the grace of entry into the kingdom with all the blessings entailed. At the same time, discipline is potentially a condemnatory action when it closes the kingdom against unbelievers or the impenitent. The heart of church discipline is the reclamation of the straying Christian, as the Geneva Confession of 1536 puts it when speaking of excommunication, “This is in order that the wicked should not by their

¹⁰³ Heidelberg Catechism Q. 83.

damnable conduct corrupt the good and dishonor our Lord, and that though proud they may turn to penitence.”¹⁰⁴ In sum, ecclesiastical disciplinary actions seek transformation of people’s lives in accordance with God’s will and standards. Therefore, discipline must be, on some level, a means of grace and is recognized as such in Reformed thought even when the language of means of grace is not applied to it.

The second observation in response to the question why discipline is not generally described as a means of grace is that this is likely the case because of the “occasional” nature of discipline—although, at one point, there were apparently five excommunications per week in Geneva!¹⁰⁵ In other words, much like the epistles of Paul were written in response to situations and needs—hence, they are described as “occasional”—so also discipline, in its most formal and narrow sense of trial, condemnation, and censure only takes place of necessity when a Christian’s life or belief strays far from Christ’s norm and proves to be scandalous. For example, the Book of Discipline of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church requires one of three situations to be the case in order for an offense to be considered serious enough to institute ecclesiastical judicial process. Book of Discipline III.7.b reads:

An offense which is serious enough to warrant a trial is: (1) an offense in the area of conduct and practice which seriously disturbs the peace, purity, and/or unity of the church, or (2) an offense in the area of doctrine for the nonordained member which would constitute a denial of a credible

¹⁰⁴ Geneva Confession 19 in Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

¹⁰⁵ According to Stephen M. Johnson, “‘The Sinews of the Body of Christ’ Calvin’s Concept of Church Discipline,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997): 97. Johnson bases his comment on the work of William Monter, “The Consistory of Geneva, 1559-1569,” *Renaissance, Reformation, and Resurgence*, ed. Peter de Klerk (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1976).

profession of faith as reflected in his membership vows, or (3) an offense in the area of doctrine for the ordained officer which would constitute a violation of the system of doctrine contained in the Holy Scriptures as that system of doctrine is set forth in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms.¹⁰⁶

Thus, unlike word, sacraments, and prayer, not every Christian will directly receive disciplinary action. This fact in itself removes church discipline from the normal or usual means of grace. Nevertheless, discipline is still a grace-based action and, therefore, should be regarded as at least a quasi-means of grace. Discipline's instrumental role for bringing God's grace to his people cannot be missed when we recognize that Reformed thought sees the fullness of discipline as more than its narrow sense of judicial process in the face of egregious offense. This was made clear earlier with reference to Bucer and discipline broadly construed.

Germane to the question of church discipline is also the holiness of the church. The church that tolerates wrongdoing in her midst is both out of sync with God's righteousness as well as disobedient to his commands. It is precisely in relation to obedience and holiness that discipline takes another, broader turn: it is inseparable from the concept of shepherding—shepherding understood as a form of leadership intended to guide Christ's people into and along the paths of righteousness established by God.

The Shepherd Providers: The Office of Deacon

As I sought to demonstrate above, a Reformed view of Christ's work as king includes his victory over death and, thereby, his concern for every form of human

¹⁰⁶ *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 99-100.

suffering. The royal work also includes the establishment of righteousness and justice. Justice includes the right to have the necessities for life and existence. It is in the church's ministry of mercy, led by the deacons, in which both the victory over death and the establishment of justice are made evident.

Calvin considered deacons the fourth order of church government and believed, based on his understanding of the ancient church, that there were to be two classes or orders of deacons: procurators and hospitallers. The *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances* explain the distinction:

There were always two kinds [of deacons] in the ancient Church, the one deputed to receive, dispense and hold goods for the poor, not only daily alms, but also possessions, rents and pensions; the other to tend and care for the sick and administer allowances to the poor. This custom we follow again now for we have procurators and hospitallers.¹⁰⁷

Clearly, the deacons were responsible for the material and temporal well-being of the church. As McKee explains, "They [the deacons] are those Christian leaders charged with temporal care for the neighbor in order to leave the presbyters free for the ministry of word and sacraments."¹⁰⁸ Another way of expressing the heart of diaconal ministry is as a ministry "of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress."¹⁰⁹ Ministry that shows compassion whether to those suffering physical ailments, mental or emotional distress, or injustice is a work that seeks to

¹⁰⁷ Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 64.

¹⁰⁸ Elsie Anne McKee, "The Offices of Elders and Deacons in the Classical Reformed Tradition," *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), 348-9.

¹⁰⁹ Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.), *Book of Order 2011/2013*, 26.

bring Christ's victory over death and his lordship over all to bear in the individual situations. Diaconal ministry is the work of restoring to wholeness to the extent possible this side of the eschaton. Restoration to wholeness, especially when viewed as assistance to the poor, is at the heart of the shepherding ministry of provision.

The shepherding metaphor always brings into view the blessing of provision that a shepherd makes for his sheep cluing us into the reality that God's grace for his people extends to the material provision of their needs. Not that the church takes the role of covering every expense for every member but, through the diaconal office and the ministry of mercy, provision is made for those members who may have need. Yet, it is not only or strictly provision in the case of shortfalls in one's financial requirements. Rather, the diaconal ministry of mercy also extends to assisting members in all the ups-and-downs and the ebb-and-flow of life. This is best explained by example. Take a church member who is facing surgery and will likely be incapacitated for a time or the woman whose husband suddenly dies leaving her alone to care for herself and her children. The deacons exercise leadership in seeing to it that the individuals involved in both these scenarios are being assisted even in the mundane and day-to-day activities of life as they go through the transition from one stage to another. They may arrange for transportation for the ill, help around the house for the widow, guidance on financial matters, care for the lawn, etc. In other words, the deacons express God's pastoral care for every detail of our lives. They are a reminder of Christ's promise in

Luke 12 that the Father knows every need of his children and gladly gives them the kingdom.

Even though the deacons are charged with the ministry of mercy, they are not the only ones in the church who are to help the poor and needy and to reach out to the suffering and oppressed. Rather, they are to “exercise, in the fellowship of the church, a recognized stewardship of care and of gifts for those in need or distress.”¹¹⁰ The stewardship of care and of gifts, although often understood to focus on disbursing financial assistance from the alms of the people, extends to engaging the congregation as a whole in acts of service. In other words, the deacons exercise stewardship of the skills, abilities, knowledge, etc. of members of a congregation so as to call on them to assist one another and those outside the church. Another way of putting this is to say that every believer is called to be a king in Christ by sharing in the work of mercy and justice. McKee connects the work of the deacons to the calling of the church as a whole to show care and compassion to one another and to strangers. She writes:

The larger theological context for the ministry of deacons is the function of *caritas*, a summary of the second table of the law in Reformed thought. Worship of God and love of the neighbor are the fundamental expressions of the famous Calvinist third use of the law as a guide for regenerate behavior. These two things, worship and love, are required of all believers, but certain individuals are called by God and elected by the church to exercise these ministries in a public and official way. The deacons are the church’s ministers for the necessary service of the neighbor, the *caritas* that must flow out of any right adoration of God.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 14.

¹¹¹ McKee, “Elders and Deacons,” 349.

This *caritas*, as we saw earlier in a brief quote from Charles Hodge, is part of the law of the kingdom. Hence, keeping this law, the church lives out and manifests the royal provision of Christ the King, the grace of the renewal of all of life.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ is the victorious Warrior Shepherd and Messianic King who bested Satan and the powers, sin, and death. He also established God's lordship over the cosmos. All these things he accomplished decisively at the cross and in his resurrection. As King and Head of the church, he continues to apply the benefits of his victory to his people, his kingdom of grace, the church. Even as he is the source and power behind the application of the benefits of his royal victory, he has appointed the ordained church offices to manifest his kingly benefits and to apply them to the church. The work of pastors and elders is the work of warrior-shepherds protecting and guiding the flock as well as disciplining them for their growth in sanctification. Deacons make available the benefits of Christ the king as shepherd-provider as they see to the material and temporal needs of the church. By their service, they manifest the *caritas* of Christ in which the church is called to share.

CONCLUSION

In the mid-nineteenth century, Presbyterian minister and theologian Stuart Robinson published a book based on his inaugural lectures at Danville Seminary entitled *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel and The Idea, Structure, and Functions Thereof*.¹ Robinson's rationale for publishing this work was the evident pressure, on the one side, from "anti-evangelical churchism" and, on the other, from "the prevalence of an anti-ecclesiastical evangelicalism."² Although, as a good Presbyterian, Stuart did not want to make the church in itself the source of salvation, he nevertheless argued that God had ordained the church to be the means through which the Holy Spirit would call, gather, and edify the people of God. Stuart was not alone in his concerns among American Reformed and Presbyterians. John Williamson Nevin also articulated through a range of occasional articles and treatises his concern for recovering the centrality of the church in the Christian life. Nevin contrasted evangelical revivalism and Puritanism with the religion, as he called it, of the catechism—a religion that was committed to a steady diet of good preaching and the use of the means of grace administered through the church for growth and maturity.³

A pointed question arising from any discussion of the place of the church in God's plan of salvation is in what sense and to what degree God's work necessitates

¹ Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel and the Idea, Structure, and Functions Thereof* (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858).

² *Ibid.*, 11.

³ D. G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2005). On the "religion of the catechism," see pp. 96-103.

or entails mediation distinct from the unique and unrepeatable mediation of Jesus Christ. In other words, most Protestants agree that God has objectively accomplished what is necessary to bring his redemptive blessing to people and is effecting redemption among them, but all do not agree on the place of human or human-institutional mediation of that redemption. The influence of Puritan “experiential Christianity” in combination with the revivalistic tendencies stemming from the First and Second Great Awakenings and the continual Evangelical-Protestant thirst for divine experiences has raised a strong barrier against the notion that the church has been entrusted in any substantial or essential sense with the mediation of God’s grace to individuals. Hence, many in Reformed and Presbyterian churches, churches whose theological heritage either derives from or, at the least, has been profoundly shaped by John Calvin’s thought, find it hard fully to embrace Calvin’s assertion, following Cyprian, of the motherhood of the church.⁴

My project has sought to recover and restate the Reformed commitment to the centrality of the church in God’s plan of salvation by exploring the interrelationship of grace and ecclesiology with a focus on ordained church office and, in doing so, to articulate from within the Reformed tradition how and in what sense grace is mediated through the church. Put another way, this project has sought to define what grace is in Reformed thought and what the mediation of that grace through the church looks like.

⁴ See Sam Hamstra, Jr., “John Williamson Nevin: The Christian Ministry” (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 1990); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989); D. G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), and D. G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2005).

Emphasis on the priesthood of all believers in Protestant circles has often come to mean both the right of private judgment and the right of private encounters with God apart from mediating individuals or institutions. I have argued that, without taking away the importance of the individual, God has chosen to mediate his grace in specific forms through the church to the individual. The Reformation and Post-Reformation Reformed understandings of the three marks of the true church themselves demonstrate the inseparability of the church from the means of grace. The three marks include the right preaching of the gospel, the right administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline each of which are understood as means by which God comes to his people for their good. The three marks of the church are especially manifest through the ordained offices of the church. Pastors, chosen from within the church, are called to preach the word and to administer the sacraments. Elders are recognized as those who, in conjunction with the pastor, exercise church discipline. Deacons represent the church in ministries of mercy. There is therefore a deeply embedded relationship between church office and the ministration of grace.

The apparent overemphasis or misuse of the Protestant concept of the priesthood of all believers has led to a lack of clarity on the role of ordained office within the church.⁵ While all believers exercise, at least informally, prophetic, priestly, and royal roles, there are nevertheless distinct ways these roles are performed by ordained church offices. A focus on the ordained allows the distinct service of these offices to take on greater relief and clarity. Furthermore, a focus on

⁵ See D.G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk*, chapter 7, "Whatever Happened to Office?"

the formal offices upholds the centrality of the church itself in God's plan of salvation—the overarching theme of my project. An overemphasis in some Reformed churches in the past several decades on the individual believer's exercise of the prophetic, priestly, and royal roles has led to the downplaying of the corporate dimension of the church. Drawing attention to formal office emphasizes the part the community itself plays in the mediation of grace in a way that the usual attention to the priesthood of individual believers does not. Thus, focus on formal office brings a proper balance to the church and assures that none of God's blessings for his people is missed.

Addressing the Two-Office/Three-Office Issue

As indicated in the Introduction, since at least the nineteenth century, there have been two central approaches in Reformed thought to understanding the relationship between the office of pastor and that of elder.⁶ On the two-office side, the view is held that there is one office of elder with two subsets often referred to as orders. The one order is the elder who functions primarily in a ministry of governance and oversight—the ruling elder—and the other order not only participates in governance and oversight but is specifically tasked with preaching and teaching—the teaching elder also known as minister or pastor. The three-office proponents, in contrast, are persuaded that the biblical data lead to a distinction not

⁶ Both the two-office and the three-office views agree on the existence of the second or third office of deacon. Hence, the two-office view sees church office to be composed of elders and deacons while the three-office argues in favor of pastors, elders, and deacons.

within an office but between two distinct offices with some overlap of duties: the office of pastor / minister and that of the elder. Germane to the debate between the two sides is the exegesis and interpretation of 1 Tim 5:17 that speaks of the honor due to elders (*presbuteroi*), especially those that labor in preaching and teaching. Part of the debate revolves around how the term *presbuteros* should be understood and whether it is itself referring to an office or to older men in the church from among whom officers might be selected.⁷

I would like to suggest that restructuring the debate away from the exegesis of 1 Tim 5 might lead to a resolution to the differences between the two and three office views. In this dissertation, I argued that God has chosen to mediate his grace to his people through the body of Christ, the church. Within that body, in particular, I have focused attention on ways in which God ministers his grace specifically through the ordained offices. I also argued that the form of the mediation of grace, as well as the nature of grace itself, is seen to correspond to the *munus triplex*. What gives rise to my view is the fact that Christ himself continues to minister as Head of the church in his estate of exaltation. Thus, all ministry in the church is the ministry

⁷ In a student paper for one of my Ph.D. seminars, I argued that the use of *presbuteros* in 1 Timothy 5 should be seen in its broader sense of “old man” because 1 Timothy 5:1-6:2 is part of a household duty code (*Haustafel*) and, just as in families of that day, so also in the church the leadership would have naturally arisen from among the older men. Thus, 1 Timothy 5 identifies necessary ministries in the context of the development of church office. It does not necessarily establish the office of “elder”. Clowney also argues that the term *presbuteros* in 1 Timothy 5 should be taken in this broader sense rather than as church office strictly speaking (see Edmund P. Clowney, “A Brief for Church Governors,” *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*, ed. Mark R. Brown (Duncansville, Pa.: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993), 61).

of Christ and therefore comes to us within the rubric of his threefold office as Prophet, Priest, and King.

If my argument is correct—even if it is not taken as the exclusive approach to understanding grace and the ministry of Christ—it seems reasonable to assume that there should be in the church offices and ministries corresponding to the threefold office of Christ because the threefold office represents the means by which God addresses the human dilemma. Robinson, arguing that the offices of the church arise out of the nature and design of the church made the assertion, “For if the offices arise out of the nature and design of the Church, the fundamental element of a proper classification is the function itself, rather than the functionary.”⁸ The offices represent functions germane to the church. Hence, if we focus on the necessary functions, we are led toward forms in which those functions are manifested and engaged.

As I pointed out in chapters three and four, part of the Reformed tradition has sought to draw a direct connection between each office of the *munus triplex* and particular offices in the church. Kuiper in his volume *The Glorious Body of Christ* and Van Dellen and Monsma in their volume on the church order of the Synod of Dort, *The Church Order Commentary*, draw a connection between the prophetic office and pastors, the royal (king) office and elders, and the priestly office and deacons. Although I disagree with the particular connections this approach makes, I agree with the instinct represented. My argument leads to a modification of the structure advocated by Kuiper, Van Dellen, and Monsma such that the pastoral office

⁸ Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God*, 90.

encompasses all three components of the *munus triplex* while both the offices of elder and deacon manifest the royal office. Elders manifest the king as governor and shepherd while deacons that of the king as provider and caretaker.

An important question might be raised at this point why I don't propose three distinct offices each tied directly to one of the threefold office. The answer is found in the close connection between the prophetic and priestly roles. I argued in chapter four that the priestly office, in a fashion similar to the prophetic, has word-ministry at its heart and center. In the Reformed approach, the sacraments are inseparable from the word such that their administration is understood as another form of the word. As the Westminster Catechisms put it, the sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant of grace. Reference to covenant immediately brings words and language into view since the covenant represents the promises given by God. Thus, whether giving the day-to-day instruction in God's word or administering the sacraments, the priestly office is engaged in a form of word-ministry. Given that the prophetic office revolves around the word as well, it makes sense to see the two tied closely together so that the office is the prophetic-priestly or priestly-prophetic office. That being the case, the remaining office is that of rule, governance, and shepherding. Because the pastoral office finds its center and accentuation in ministry of word and sacrament, it logically fulfills the priestly-prophetic office. Similarly, the office of ruling elder has rule and governance at its center therefore it logically fulfills the royal office. Since the royal office also includes care for the material needs of God's people, the diaconal office is necessary for its central role is precisely this ministry.

In the end, what I want to suggest, however, is that the functions, the work, and the service are at the core of the definition of office. God's grace in Christ takes a threefold form with each form engaging in a particular yet complementary service mediating some aspect of God's grace. Therefore, rather than focusing on a single passage like 1 Tim 5:17 to determine what constitutes office, the focus should be on the ministries that need fulfillment so that the threefold office of Christ is made manifest. If we recognize the particularity of the calling of pastors accentuated in the prophetic-priestly ministry together with its participation in the royal, on the one hand, and the particularity of the royal ministry accentuated in the calling of the elder, on the other, I think we will be led to see them as distinct offices. Each is commissioned to particular service. And, even though there is some overlap in service, the two are not identical. The prophetic-priestly ministry cannot be subsumed under the royal nor should the royal be subsumed under the prophetic-priestly. Each stands as a specific calling. I have sought to demonstrate these specificities under the rubric of the threefold office of Christ.

Rather than controversy over titles, we should recognize the central importance of the priestly and prophetic ministry, which requires skill in understanding and communicating God's word. This means those in pastoral office must be equipped both for engaging in the technical work of biblical study and exegesis as well as the work of clearly and powerfully communicating the message from God. This also requires a spiritual depth and maturity along with depth of insight. There are many ruling elders who have depth of insight, spiritual maturity, and understanding but who lack the communication ability necessary to be a

successful preacher and teacher. I believe the conclusions of chapters two and three give great weight to the communication ability since that will directly bear upon and reflect the form in which Christ's presence is made manifest in the work of word-ministry.

With respect both to elders and deacons, just as with the pastoral office, I would argue that we must recognize the gifts needed to fulfill the royal work. Elders must have insight and understanding to lead and guide a congregation while deacons must know when, how, and how much to provide for the needs of people. Simply giving handouts, for example, is not a full blessing if the recipient cannot break free of whatever has brought him low. Deacons should be able to point the way out which may involve enlisting the help both of pastors and elders.

The chief benefit of my argument is to recognize and restore the dignity of all the ordained offices as a means to spur on their effectiveness. When we see how the elder's work is rooted in Christ's royal mediation, we will be willing all the more to accept and submit to the elders' shepherd-governance. When we understand how the pastoral office is firmly grounded in Christ's prophetic and priestly offices, we will be more willing to hear the word he preaches and to receive the sacraments he administers because Christ stands behind it all. If we do not believe Christ is the one truly at work through church office, we will never receive the complete benefit the Spirit intends. My hope is that this dissertation has helped to show that Christ is himself at work in all three Reformed church offices in connection to his own threefold office so that we as a church will appreciate the gift of God all the more and receive the great grace he gives.

By taking this approach, we are no longer asking how many offices we have but what is the grace that God gives through Christ and which is ministered to us through the recognized and existing offices. And, we are recognizing that God has chosen to minister this grace in varied form through each office. There is a dignity and importance in each role for which we ought to thank God.

Ecumenical Reflections

I turn next to some reflections on a few ways this dissertation might contribute to ecumenical dialogue especially Reformed-Roman Catholic. I offer these thoughts very much as preliminary and initial. Much more research and reflection is needed before offering more definite suggestions.

In the document produced by the Reformed-Roman Catholic international dialogue, *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*⁹, the representatives of the Catholic Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches identified four questions highlighting the continuing divergence between the two communions. The first question addresses the doctrinal authority of the church, which had also been addressed in the first phase of dialogue (1970-1977) concerning differences “in the interpretation of scripture, the authority of confessions of faith and of conciliar decisions, and the question of the infallibility of the church.”¹⁰ The second

⁹ *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, Col. Studies, no. 21 (Geneva: WARC, 1991). Also printed in *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*, Faith and Order Paper, ed. Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 780-818.

¹⁰ *Towards a Common Understanding* 139.

question concerns the sacraments regarding which it is acknowledged that, even with some convergence, there is yet much that separates Reformed from Roman Catholic with respect to the number of sacraments, their nature, and the competency of the sacramental minister. The third question draws attention to divergence in the understanding of ordination while the fourth highlights the differences on “how the authority of Christ must be exercised in the church” especially with respect to “who is regarded as episkopos...and what is the function or role of the episkopos.”¹¹ It is with respect to these last two questions, ordination and authority, that I believe the material presented in this dissertation may contribute constructively to ongoing dialogue.

The Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue has identified two key issues regarding ordination that cause difficulty between the two communions. The first is whether the laying on of hands is “a sending on a mission, a passing on of a power, or an incorporation into an order” and the second is whether “a defect in form [can] put in question or invalidate the ministry as such – or can such a defect be remedied ‘by reference to the faith of the church?’”¹² Although I have not directly addressed the nature of ordination in the current project, I believe a number of the features of church office that I have articulated may be helpful to move toward a closer perspective on ordination.

¹¹ *Towards a Common Understanding* 142.

¹² Ibid. 141. The questions raised here are continuing the same questions raised in the first phase of the dialogue and recorded in the document *The Presence of Christ in Church and World* 108 (“The Presence of Christ in Church and World,” *Reformed World* 35, no. 5 (1981) or “The Presence of Christ in Church and World,” *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, Ecumenical Documents, ed. Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 434-63).

First, in keeping with an important line of thought within the Reformed tradition, I argued that not only is Christ the Head of the church but, ultimately, the only office-holder. In other words, all ministry that takes place in and through the church is Christ's ministry effected through the modality of the Holy Spirit. Regardless of the ministry—and this could apply both to ordained and lay—it is Christ who ministers. In part, this is the outcome of the nature of grace in Reformed thought—the fact that it is *mere* grace or *sheer* grace. In order for grace to remain grace, it must come to us from without. In the case of ministry in the church and by the church, for that ministry to be the mediation of grace, it must find its source and fountain in Christ himself rather than in itself. Andrew Purves puts it this way, “The gospel is God’s act-in-history, not a theory of God or ethical principles of action. In other words, pastoral theology can only meet its basic task to speak concerning God by grounding pastoral work in God’s ministry through attention to the act of God in, through and as Jesus Christ in such a way that it draws out the basis for all Christian ministry as a Spirit-enabled participation in the praxis of God.”¹³ Thus, part of the grounds for arguing for all ministry in the church to be the ministry of Christ is that in this way it is clearly God coming to us and giving to us rather than we going to God or giving to God. If we can agree that all ministry in the church is Christ’s, we have a starting point for ongoing dialogue regarding ordination since, whatever ordination is, it must accentuate the ongoing work of Christ in the church. When we set apart an individual to office in the name of Christ, we are acknowledging as well as humbly petitioning God to minister Christ’s grace to us through the ordained

¹³ Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004), xvi.

officer. Whether we believe there is an actual power being passed down, an incorporation into an order, or the commissioning for a mission, we are looking to see Christ at work among us.

Second, I have argued for understanding grace within a framework constructed from the threefold office of Christ and that the threefold office provides the foundation for and determines the nature of the ministry of church office. Here again, rather than focusing on the precise nature of the act of ordination, I suggest it would be helpful for dialogue to shift to a focus on the functions of office. The *munus triplex* is not the property solely of Reformed thought. Catholic theologians and the Roman Catholic Church in Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* have adopted the threefold framework as a means to describe ministry of both the ordained and the laity.¹⁴ Given that the *munus triplex*, including the reality that both clergy and laity participate in it by virtue of union with Christ, is both a Catholic and Reformed commitment, the *triplex* may move Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue forward. In other words, by giving deep and prolonged attention to what each component of the threefold office entails, we can begin to identify what is truly important to all ecclesial ministry. And, by studying one another's understandings within this framework, we may be able to identify a great deal of agreement. If greater agreement can be found in this respect, perhaps we will begin to have convergence

¹⁴ See, for example, Peter J. Drilling, "The Priest, Prophet and King Trilogy: Elements of its Meaning in *Lumen Gentium* and for Today," *Église et Théologie* 19 (1988): 179-206; Donald J. Goergen, "Priest, Prophet, King: The Ministry of Jesus Christ," *The Theology of Priesthood*, ed. Donald J. Goergen and Ann Garrido (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 187-209; Ormond Rush, "The Offices of Christ, *Lumen Gentium*, and the People's Sense of Faith," *Pacifica* 16 (2003): 137-52.

on the question of ordination since the goal of that ordination is to accentuate and receive the ministry of Christ through the offices.

In part, what I am describing here is akin to a line of thought articulated in the Collegeville Ministry Seminar.¹⁵ Wood summarizes the results of the seminar and directs attention to a concept put forward by the seminar called “ordered ministry.” Ordered ministries are defined as being “similar to offices in that they are functions constituted in a stable manner through divine or ecclesiastical ordinance to be carried out for a spiritual purpose.”¹⁶ In other words, there is recognition that spiritual functions are being carried out whether by laity or ordained. Without prejudice toward the hierarchy of the church, this approach provides a way to recognize spiritual service in the church and to affirm that it is real, that it is accomplishing a God-given work. Similarly, I am arguing that a focus on the work, the service, the task of each aspect of the *munus triplex* and how that is manifest in the work of ordained church offices may provide a way to work toward a mutual recognition of Reformed and Roman Catholic ministers, ministries, and ordination.

With respect to the exercise of the authority of Christ in the church, the Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue acknowledges divergence over who exercises episcopé on the local, regional, and universal level even though there is agreement on the essentially collegial nature of ministry.¹⁷ In the Reformed tradition, each local congregation has a session or consistory composed of the pastor(s) together

¹⁵ See the summary provided by Susan K. Wood, “Conclusion: Convergence Points toward a Theology of Ordered Ministries,” *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood: Theologies of Lay and Ordained Ministry*, ed. Susan K. Wood (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 256-67.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁷ *Towards a Common Understanding* 142.

with the elders elected by the congregation. This body exercises the immediate and day-to-day episkopé of the members of the local church. The regional church is governed by the presbytery or classis composed of all the pastors in the designated region together with representative elders from the congregations in the region. The next level is the general assembly or synod covering a national territory and includes, depending on the particular Reformed church, representative pastors and elders from the presbyteries/classes or is open to all ordained pastors and elders.¹⁸ The presbytery/classis level is the closest to a diocese in the Roman Catholic structure except that episkopé is exercised by a body rather than an individual bishop. At the same time, to borrow a phrase from Charles Hodge, the local church session/consistory is a kind of parochial episcopacy.¹⁹ In other words, if compared to a diocese, the pastor is similar in position to the bishop with the elders and deacons as his collaborators.²⁰

Once again, I'd like to press the point about the presence of Christ through the threefold office as a possible approach to convergence on aspects of the question of episkopé. In my project, I have argued that pastors have a role or a share in all

¹⁸ For example, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) designates, based on the size of a given presbytery, how many ministers and how many ruling elders that presbytery should elect and send to the general assembly while the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) allows for all ministers and elders who choose to do so to attend.

¹⁹ Charles Hodge, "Rights of Ruling Elders," *Discussions in Church Polity*, ed. William Durant (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), 274.

²⁰ An important point to bear in mind is that pastors are examined and ordained by the presbytery/classis. In other words, their ordination is at a "diocesan" level with similarities to bishops in the Catholic understanding. Elders, in contrast, are examined and ordained by the local session/consistory. Also, historically, hands were laid on the ordinand only in the case of pastors not elders or deacons. This now varies within the range of Reformed churches. It does, however, point to a distinction in the nature of the ordination of pastors and other church officers.

three aspects of the threefold office while elders and deacons, each in their own way, have a role primarily in the royal office. The Catholic view attributes a participation in the threefold office to all the faithful while maintaining a distinct exercise of the threefold office in the ordained ministry. Might there be a way to recognize the legitimate exercise of the authority of Christ in both the Catholic episcopal form and the Presbyterian synodical form without mandating a convergence of the forms? In other words, focusing on the reality of Christ's threefold presence manifested either in one bishop or in a body of pastors and elders, can we not be assured of the Divinely mandated work and service taking place?

On a Reformed view, the laity is given voice and a share in the governance and episcopé of the church specifically through the elders. As I pointed out in the introduction, one of the developments resulting from the Reformation was the introduction of offices in the church held by laity. A possible way in which Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue can move forward is to view the presence of elders in the various levels of church order as an aspect of the "universal consensus in matters of faith and morals."²¹ Elders in Reformed churches participate in the examination and approval of pastoral candidates, taking part in testing both the faith and the life of the candidate. They also participate in doctrinal discussions and every other aspect of the life of the church that is under the authority of the presbytery or general assembly. Thus, when a presbytery or general assembly meets, it is a manifestation of the authority of Christ at work through the pastors—

²¹ *Lumen Gentium* 12 [Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing, 1996), 17].

who have a distinct connection to the threefold office—and through the laity represented by the elders who together with the pastors show “the entire people’s supernatural sense of the faith.”²² The laity, through the elders, formally express agreement in the faith. The key is to continue to maintain a focus on the reality of the presence of Christ through his threefold office made manifest through the ordained offices of the church.

Another issue subsumed under the discussion of episkopé in *Toward a Common Understanding of the Church* is the understanding of what it means to speak of the ordained acting *in persona Christi*. The dialogue draws attention to the Catholic commitment to the belief that ordination unites the minister with Christ in a manner essentially different from the laity. And, this union with Christ, “the sole High Priest...qualifies him [the minister] to represent Christ in and for the community.”²³ This representation includes representing the church before God “in its offering to the Father through Christ in the Spirit.” The ministry *in persona Christi* is “especially realized in the eucharistic celebration.” Furthermore, as *Lumen Gentium* puts it, the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” through which the church as the priestly community of ordained ministers and all the faithful “offer the divine victim to God and themselves along with him.”²⁴ In other words, both in the conception of the church and of church office, the idea of a priestly offering unto God is important to Catholic faith.

²² Ibid.

²³ *Towards a Common Understanding* 142(a).

²⁴ *Lumen Gentium* 11 (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 15).

In chapter one, I pointed out that one of the preferred metaphors for the church among the Reformed is the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit. I have also touched on the idea of the priesthood of all believers. Both of these concepts bring into view the importance of offering worship to God as well as the reality that all believers have a right and a share in that worship. In this regard, we can find some similarities between Catholic and Reformed thought. Differences remain in the understanding of the Eucharist. Convergence may be found, however, if we focus on aspects of priestly ministry I highlighted in chapter three of my dissertation. In that chapter, I argued that priesthood has often been conceived as “terminating” in God. In other words, priestly actions are intended to have an effect on God or are directed toward God. This is most profoundly manifested in the once-for-all atoning offering made by Christ. In contrast, I sought to demonstrate that priestly service also has a dimension that terminates in humans. In other words, the priestly office was given to bring God’s transforming grace to bear upon his people. I also argued for the ways in which this kind of priestly service is part of the pastoral ministry. It is with respect to the Divine to human direction of grace that focused discussion may yield further convergence.

Historically, the difficulty Reformed thought has had with the Roman Catholic viewpoint on priesthood is especially the concept of sacrifice applied to the Eucharist. One dimension, however, of the priestly offering in which convergence may be found is the sense in which the Reformed pastor acts as priest offering up Christ’s people to God especially through the ministry of the word. I draw attention again to a line of thought from Francis Turretin in which, working with Rom 15:16

as foundation, he speaks of the pastor as the priest who, by the sword of the Spirit—the word of God—slays the people and offers them up to God. The Apostle Paul's ambition, articulated in Col 1:28-29, was *to present* everyone complete in Christ. In Rom 15:16, he makes a similar point using explicitly cultic-liturgical language as he speaks of his priestly offering of the Gentiles unto God. Ultimately, this captures the heart of my dissertation which is to show how Christ ministers his transforming grace through ordained church office to perfect his people that they might present themselves as an offering of thanks unto God. This being the case, there could be a point of convergence with Catholic thought respecting the priest's action *in persona Christi* offering himself and the faithful unto God. Whether there actually is a point of convergence here requires further investigation but may prove to be a fruitful avenue of dialogue.

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