

CHRIST'S MINISTRY AND OURS: A TRINITARIAN AND REFORMED PERSPECTIVE ON THE MINISTRY OF THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD

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At first glance, any connection that might exist between Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity and life in a secularizing, increasingly "pluralistic" society must seem to be remote and incorrigibly abstruse. One reason, I'm sure, that I received this assignment is that I have spent the last eight years of my life seeking to understand and explicate the role of the Trinity in Calvin's thought. My dissertation at Duke University was entitled, *Calvin, the Trinity, and the Divine-Human Relationship*.¹ Next summer it is scheduled for publication with Oxford University Press.² A second reason is certainly that I am currently a happily practicing pastor of a diverse, multicultural Presbyterian congregation in New Mexico which — by the grace of God — is having some success in facing the challenges with which secularization and pluralism have confronted the whole American church.

But the question as to whether there is even any plausible — let alone intrinsic — theological connection between these two seemingly remote arenas remains. I am convinced there is, and I happily accepted the challenges of demonstrating it to you today. I will go about this in four steps. First, I will summarize briefly for you two points from my forthcoming book that show the relevance of Calvin's trinitarian perspective to our topic. Second, I will indicate how the economic perichoresis of Son and Spirit in Calvin's doctrine of the threefold office of Christ intimately interconnects Christ's ministry and that of the church. Third, with an accent on Christology, I will develop the implications of the statement that "the church's ministry is Christ's ministry," building on the doctrine of the threefold office in the theology of both the Heidelberg Catechism and Karl Barth. Fourth, with an accent on pneumatology, I will develop the implications of the statement that "Christ's ministry is the church's ministry." Here, I will identify three contemporary challenges that a "secularizing, pluralistic society" poses to the church, and suggest how the church might address them through a fresh affirmation of the priestly, royal and prophetic aspects of its ministry. The actual title of my paper is "Christ's Ministry and Ours: A Trinitarian and Reformed Perspective on the Ministry of the Whole People of God."

I. The Trinity in Calvin's Thought

Ever since F.C. Baur's monumental three-volume study of the history of the doctrine of the Trinity (1843)³, the dominant stream of Reformation interpretation has regarded the doctrine of the Trinity in the thought of the magisterial reformers as being little more than a traditional and formal convention, intended primarily to establish the historical orthodoxy of Protestant theology. Due to the influence of Baur's perspective on almost two centuries of Calvin interpretation, it has come to be widely assumed that the doctrine of the Trinity as such was on the periphery of the reformers' concern. As a result, the suggestion that Calvin's thought is intrinsically trinitarian sounds intuitively implausible to many Reformation scholars.

I have sought to overcome this tendency, based first on a close examination of Calvin's little-known and largely polemical anti-trinitarian writings, and second, on a reassessment of the theological role of the Trinity in his thought in general. I believe that the doctrine of the Trinity served as a pervasive — if often implicit — overarching paradigm for the divine-human relationship in Calvin's thought. In addition, I have argued that Calvin's distinctively trinitarian way of understanding the divine-human relationship makes several important contributions to the history of the doctrine of the Trinity in the West.⁴ In this context I will mention only two.

The first arises from Calvin's pervasive concern to develop all doctrine — not from abstract or philosophically-rooted speculation about the divine being — but rather from careful exegesis of specific biblical texts. It is well-known that the New Testament's concern for what later came to be called the doctrine of the Trinity is fundamentally economic and soteriological: it arises from the need to explain the interacting roles of God the Father, Son, and Spirit in the economy of human salvation. Similarly, Calvin's articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is also predominantly economic. This is to say that where the Trinity is concerned, Calvin's primary concern is not so much with the intra-trinitarian relationships of the three *hypostaseis*, or with the perennial "problem" of relating the three persons to the single divine *ousia*, but rather with the way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit interact in making the divine-human relationship possible and actual. This is not to minimize Calvin's profound commitment to the doctrinal formulations of Nicene orthodoxy, which was powerfully — if unfortunately — evident in his response to Servetus and the Italian anti-Nicene heretics who confronted him in Geneva. It is simply to emphasize that for Calvin, the God of scripture — the true God with whom Christian believers have to do — is simply and solely the God who reveals the divine nature, redeems the people of God, and constitutes human response to God definitively in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

Simply put, for Calvin, the doctrine of the Trinity *is* the doctrine of God. The final structure of the 1559 *Institutes* makes this clear.⁵ There, any discrete discussion of divine attributes is conspicuously absent. Rather, the doctrine of God is developed in trinitarian terms from the outset, in the context of Calvin's effort to show how the true God is to be distinguished from idols. This insight was certainly not original to Calvin. It was present in various degrees in the thought of important early church theologians. But it soon became overshadowed in the tradition by speculative attempts to understand the divine being in philosophical categories. And it has only recently begun to be recovered in mainstream Christian theology on a broadly ecumenical scale. Calvin's remarkably clear articulation of it in the sixteenth century deserves our notice and our appreciation.

The second factor that is important for our present topic is that Calvin's distinctive way of understanding and articulating the relationships and interaction of the trinitarian *hypostaseis* in the economic realm has remarkable points of contact with the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *perichoresis*. If you are familiar with Chapter 13 of Book I of the 1559 *Institutes* on the Trinity, you will remember that at a crucial point in his argument, Calvin appeals to a well-known statement of Gregory Nazianzen which has typically been an important locus for the justification of this doctrine in the Eastern tradition in order to explain the unity of the three divine *hypostaseis*:

And that passage in Gregory of Nazianzus vastly delights me: 'I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightaway carried back to the one.' Let us not, then, be led

to imagine a trinity of persons which includes an idea of separation, and does not at once lead us back to that unity.⁶

Though he does not use the term perichoresis itself (or its Latin equivalent), he goes on to clarify the nature of the divine unity by means of strikingly similar conceptions.⁷

The Father is said to be in Christ because in Him full divinity dwells and displays its power. And Christ, in His turn, is said to be in the Father because by His divine power He shows that He is one with the Father.⁸

I have only to refer to the obvious perichoresis of Word and Spirit in Calvin's doctrine of scripture, to Calvin's pioneering efforts to inter-relate justification and sanctification in Book III of the 1559 *Institutes*, or to the crucial role of the Spirit in making tangible and real the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper to illustrate briefly how this perichoretic understanding of the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit in the economy of the divine-human relationship expressed itself consistently throughout his broader thought.

II. The Threefold Office in Calvin

Now we are ready to focus more specifically on how Calvin's trinitarian understanding of the divine-human relationship affected his understanding of Christ's ministry and that of the church. In the magisterial Reformation, the starting point for the theology of the church's ministry was the ministry of Christ. John Calvin was sympathetic with Luther's understanding of "the priesthood of all believers."⁹ It was important to him that in Christ, "we are all priests...to offer praises and thanksgiving, in short, to offer ourselves and ours to God."¹⁰ Calvin was committed to the conviction that all believers have access to God through Christ, without need for any other intermediary.

But Calvin was also a second generation reformer who could stand on Luther's shoulders. As such, he was able to expand his understanding of the Christian ministry beyond his mentor's helpful but still limited redefinition of the medieval ministerial model of "priesthood." Calvin's efforts to understand Christ's ministry more comprehensively than his predecessors began in earnest with the Geneva Catechism of 1542. There, he settled upon a model for understanding Christ's work that later Reformed Christians came to call "the threefold office."¹¹ You will recall that the "threefold office" is a way of organizing our understanding of the risen Christ's ministry in the church under the three concepts of king, priest, and prophet.¹²

Calvin's use of the "threefold office" was based on the assumption that as Messiah, Christ was the fulfillment of each of these three main ministry roles in the Old Testament, each of which had been liturgically acknowledged through ceremonial anointing. Emphasizing that the very name "Christ" means "anointed One," Calvin was careful to specify in trinitarian terms that Christ's anointing was not with oil; rather, it was an anointing "by the Father" "with the grace of the Holy Spirit."¹³

At this point it is crucial to recall Calvin's understanding of the Holy Spirit in 1559 *Institutes* III.1-3 as "the way we receive the grace of Christ" and "the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself." In trinitarian terms, this conception is built upon the theological assumption of a profound perichoresis of the second and third persons of the Trinity in the economic realm of the divine-human relationship. The primary purpose of

Christ's threefold messianic anointing with the Holy Spirit was so that his life, death, and resurrection could count *pro nobis*; so that believers in the church could receive Christ's benefits and so share in his ministry.¹⁴ Calvin himself made the centrality of this connection clear in the Geneva Catechism:

Jesus Christ has received all these gifts in order that he may communicate them to us, and that all of us may receive out of his fullness.... He received the Holy Spirit in full perfection with all his graces, that he might lavish them upon us and distribute them, each according to the measure and portion which the Father knows to be expedient. Thus we may draw from him as from a fountain all the spiritual blessings we possess.¹⁵

Fundamentally, then, Calvin's use of the "threefold office" was a way of emphasizing the continuity between Christ's ministry and ours. Through the perichoretic bond of connection established by the Holy Spirit, Christ's life and ministry is rooted in and flows from the life and ministry of Christ himself. This suggests the possibility that not only Christ's ministry — but also the derivative ministry of all believers in the church which flows from it — can be helpfully understood under the threefold rubric of king, priest, and prophet.

Now let me spell out, in turn, both the threefold ministry of Christ and the threefold ministry of the church in more systematic-theological terms. I'll be building on the broad theological framework and order of presentation that Calvin established in his chapter on the threefold office of Christ in 1559 *Institutes* I.15. I will also continue to refer occasionally to Calvin's Geneva Catechism. But in order to bridge towards our contemporary situation, I will need some help from the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism, which has confessional status in a wide spectrum of Reformed denominations, and from the 20th century Reformed theology of Karl Barth.¹⁶ My main focus is on how — based on Calvin's seminal insights — the church's threefold ministry can most authentically flow from Christ's threefold ministry in the contemporary situation in which we find ourselves at the turn of the 21st century.

III. The Threefold Ministry of Christ

What must be said first is that **the church's ministry is Christ's ministry**. In other words, Christ is the church's true and paradigmatic minister. Wherever and whenever the church forgets this, a devastating combination of presumption and exhaustion results. To the extent that the church is ineffectual, it is likely that it is undertaking ministry on its own, as a merely human endeavor. Reformed Christians believe that we have a ministry only insofar as we participate in and express the ministry of Christ. Genuine ministry is neither initiated, nor sustained, nor consummated by merely human effort and energy. To put this point in terms of the threefold office: in the first instance, it is Christ who is prophet, king, and priest for us all. Let's explore briefly what this means in each of the three ministerial roles.

In the Reformed tradition, our understanding of **Christ's ministry as prophet** has always focused around the unique revelation of God the Father that we see in Christ. God has given us this self-revelation in the birth, life, words, death, resurrection, and ascension of his Son as attested in scripture. At my current congregation in the season of Advent, we focused on the first 18 verses of the gospel of John, where Jesus Christ is identified as the "Word" — the "*logos*" — and the Word is identified as very God. Reformed Christians have always based whatever knowledge and understanding of God we have on the apprehension of God

that has grasped us in Jesus Christ. For us, the true God — the God who really is — is the God who makes the divine nature known in Christ. In a cultural milieu in which it is fashionable for people to define their own gods according to their needs, experiences, aspirations, and tastes, an awareness of the prophetic office of Jesus Christ reminds us that he is God's unique self-revelation. Christ is the ultimate criterion by which Reformed Christians identify and recognize the true God. As Calvin put it, we call Christ "prophet" because

on coming down into the world he was the sovereign messenger and ambassador of God his Father, to give a full exposition of God's will toward the world...¹⁷

Next, we come to the priestly office of Christ. In the Reformed tradition, our understanding of Christ's ministry as priest has focused around his role as Mediator: as the one who reconciles human beings to God and continuously mediates the divine-human relationship. As Calvin put it, "the priestly office belongs uniquely to Christ because by the sacrifice of his death he blotted out our own guilt and made satisfaction for our sins."¹⁸ No additional human mediation or sacrifices need ever be added to the finished work of Christ accomplished in his atoning death on the cross, his resurrection, and his ascension. Acting as the divine-human Mediator both on behalf of God and on behalf of humanity, Christ's priestly sacrifice made possible once and for all God's forgiveness and grace in the face of human sin.

At the same time, acting as our human representative before God, "he is an everlasting intercessor."¹⁹ In his continuous priestly ministry he makes possible the intimate interaction of Christians with God in prayer and worship.²⁰ Only in and through him can we "offer ourselves and our all" as sacrifices that are pleasing to God.²¹

Finally, we come to the kingly, or royal office of Christ. In the Reformed tradition, our understanding of Christ's ministry as king has focused around his leadership, power, and sovereignty in the life of the church and in the life of believers. The Heidelberg Catechism sees Christ's eternal kingship in his "governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us."²² In the *Institutes*, Calvin put it even more strongly when he said that "the Father has given all power to the Son that he may by the Son's hand govern, nourish, and sustain us, keep us in his care, and help us."²³

It is an established Reformed principle, especially in American Presbyterian circles, that Christ is the only head of the church. That is one Presbyterian way of confessing Christ as king. It implies that all power and authority are derivative; that ultimately they trace back to the kingship of the One who, in the words of Revelation 11:15, "shall reign forever and ever." Of course, this commitment is easily overlooked or rationalized in situations where the Reformed faith is more or less "established," whether formally or informally. In such contexts, the "Theological Declaration of Barmen" makes eloquent testimony to the unique kingship of Christ. It declares, "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." It goes on to say, "We reject the false doctrine, as though the State over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life..."²⁴ Jesus alone is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Revelation 17:14).

The same principle applies in the church's internal understanding of itself. All power, authority, and leadership in the church depend on the ultimate power, authority, and leadership of Jesus Christ. But biblically speaking, the power and authority of Christ in the

church are shown in an ironic inversion of everything that we tend to associate with those ideas in our day-to-day world. As Karl Barth so aptly stated it in the titles of Volume IV of his *Church Dogmatics*, Jesus Christ is “The Lord as Servant” and the “Servant as Lord.”²⁵ Christ’s power and authority are found precisely in his renunciation of normal human channels of power and authority, so that he could share the gifts and resources of God with human beings. In this, and in the example of his own sacrificial death on the cross, he defined leadership in terms of service.

IV. The Threefold Ministry of the Church

We’ve discussed in three aspects what it means to say that the church’s ministry is Christ’s ministry. A chief concern in this has been to warn against the false perception that the church’s ministry depends ultimately on us. To the contrary, it is crucial for the church to acknowledge that our ministry is Christ’s ministry, and that he is the church’s primary minister. But at this point, we must recall again the intimate perichoresis of Son and Spirit that Calvin assumes in his theology of the church’s ministry. The Holy Spirit is “the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.” When we shift the accent to pneumatology, we also and immediately have to turn the phrase around and say that **Christ’s ministry is the church’s ministry**. Each Christian believer — each baptized member of the church — is called by God and enabled by the Holy Spirit to share in Christ’s ministry.

The Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes that baptized believers bear the name “Christian” (in the German original, as you may recall, the word is simply *Christ*, which makes the point dramatically) because as the church we, too, are anointed by the Holy Spirit to carry forth the prophetic, priestly, and royal ministry of Christ. “Through faith,” it says, “I am a limb or member of Christ and thus I am a partaker in his anointing.”²⁶ Ursinus, who was the primary author of the catechism, expanded on this point in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*. There he spelled out the connection between Christ’s ministry and our ministry, appealing to the biblical analogy of the church as Christ’s body.

To be a member of Christ is to be engrafted into him, and to be united to him by the same Holy Spirit dwelling in him and in us, and by this Spirit to be made a possessor of such righteousness and life as is in Christ... Christ is the living head from whom the Holy Spirit is made to pass over into every member..., from whom all the members are made to draw their life, and by whom they are ruled as long as they remain united to him by the Spirit dwelling in him and us.²⁷

He goes on to show that the primary implication of believer’s participation in Christ’s anointing by the Spirit is that we share in his threefold ministry as prophet, priest, and king. We do this by employing the ministry gifts that the Spirit has given us.

To be a partaker of the anointing of Christ is, therefore, 1) To be a partaker of the Holy Spirit and of his gifts, for the Spirit of Christ is not idle or inactive in us, but works the same in us that he does in Christ... 2) That Christ communicates his prophetic, sacerdotal, and kingly office unto us.²⁸

With this in mind, we will focus for the remainder of our discussion on how recovering the connection of Christ’s threefold ministry and our ministry can help guide those of the Reformed tradition through the crisis that former “mainline” American churches are facing at the turn of the 21st century. For formal purposes, I will proceed by

identifying three central challenges posed to us by our secularizing and growingly “pluralistic” culture. Then I will suggest a distinctively Reformed approach to each challenge, based on the connections already indicated between Christ’s threefold office or ministry and ours. At this point, I will adopt the order of discussion put forward by Karl Barth in volume IV of the *Church Dogmatics*, because I am sympathetic with his profound twentieth century use of the Reformed threefold office to spell out the implications of the constantly interpenetrating roles of Son and Spirit in the life and ministry of the church.²⁹

A. A Priestly Ministry

Perhaps the most obvious challenge to the contemporary American church is that we are now living in a broken, disintegrating culture with fewer and fewer shared values. There was a time when at least the myth of a “Christian cultural consensus” in America could be reasonably maintained. That time is past, and we all know it.³⁰ In its place has come what we politely call “pluralism,” but which in effect amounts to cultural chaos. The possibility of a broad cultural consensus on most issues is now gone.

From the church’s perspective, this means that more and more of our neighbors and family members are making up their own rules, following self-created standards, and consequently living outside of God’s design for them. Some may do this through wilful rejection of Christian values. Many more may simply lack the opportunity to be adequately exposed to those values.

Christians believe that God is the Creator of all people, and that the Creator’s loving design for life is the path to human wholeness for us all. It follows that as more and more people live outside the Creator’s design, they will experience greater and greater brokenness and fragmentation in their lives.

This is where the church’s participation in Christ’s priestly ministry comes in. The focus of Christ’s priestly ministry is the reconciliation of wayward, broken people with God. When Calvin discusses Christ’s priestly office in the 1559 *Institutes*, he emphasizes,

Christ assumes the priestly role, not only to render the Father favorable and propitious toward us by an eternal law of reconciliation, but also to receive us as companions in this great office. For we who are defiled in ourselves, are still priests in him.³¹

Before Calvin, Martin Luther had been fond of emphasizing that “the greatest good which the community of faith possesses is that the forgiveness of sins is to be found in it.”³² As Reformed Christians at the close of the Twentieth Century, we can willingly affirm that whatever role we may play as the church in helping wayward human beings to find the reconciliation, healing, and forgiveness of the Gospel is a gracious fulfillment of Christ’s priestly office.

Concretely, this means that the church must begin by being a community of reconciliation. Biblically speaking, the primary axis of Christian reconciliation is vertical. “We entreat you on behalf of Christ,” the apostle Paul could say in the first century, “be reconciled to God” (II Corinthians 5:20). But reconciliation in Christ has a necessarily horizontal axis as well. Thus Jesus admonished his followers that the claim to be reconciled to God is a hollow mockery if at the same time we are not reconciled with our fellow human beings (Matthew 5:23-24). The church is entrusted to carry forward the priesthood of Christ.

Within this trust, the Gospel impels us to strive to make our congregations places of welcome, acceptance, and reconciliation for all.

B. A Royal Ministry

A second contemporary challenge is that today we face a radical change in the relationship of former "mainline" American churches to secular authority and power. There was a time when many people perceived a kind of unofficial "coalition" between the agenda that concerned "mainline" Christians and the agenda that was addressed by America's various levels of government. But as our culture has fragmented, so has the government's ability to identify, prioritize, and address specific moral and cultural issues of general concern. As a result, we now face a political situation in which politicians are likely to take their cues from partisan lobby groups and special interests, of which the church is often perceived to be yet another instance.

In this context, the church's existing understandings of power and authority have come under radical questioning. To the extent that today's churches have any authority at all, it does not consist in access to general corridors of power in the broader culture. At every Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly, efforts are still made to speak to various levels of national and international government, but no one seems to be listening. Rather, whatever authority the church still may have is dependent upon the voluntary affiliation of a specific individual with a particular community of faith. And even that very limited authority has fallen under radical critique. Civil lawsuits have been brought against various congregations and denominations over their right to exercise church discipline even with their own voluntary members.

But what some may see as a cause for lament may actually be a providential opportunity to reassess the church's former understandings of power, authority, and leadership. Perhaps this crisis can refocus the church on the biblical and theological meaning of Christ's own power and authority and leadership. For too long, American denominations and congregations have uncritically embraced the "top-down" models of authority and leadership that were prevalent in the larger culture.

An authentically Reformed understanding of authority must derive from the Reformed commitment to Christ's unique kingship. Insofar as the church's ministry glorifies God, it is because Christ himself is the actual leader and "head of the church." "But such is the nature of his rule," Calvin clarifies, "that he shares with us all that he has received from the Father."³³ Calvin sums up the implications of Christ's kingship for the church's ministry like this:

Hence we are furnished, as far as God knows to be expedient for us, with the gifts of the Spirit, which we lack by nature. By these first fruits we may perceive that we are truly joined to God in perfect blessedness. Then, relying on the power of the same Spirit, let us not doubt that we shall always be victorious over the devil, the world, and every kind of harmful thing.³⁴

Our discussion of the Heidelberg Catechism above drew out the implications of Calvin's point: Christ's headship implies that the ministry of every member of his body is equally important. Biblical texts like I Corinthians 13, Ephesians 4, and Romans 12 are the basis of that conviction. That means that for Reformed Christians, a direct implication of

Christ's kingly office is the "ministry of the whole people of God." This understanding of ministry is opposed to any hierarchical understanding that sees power as trickling down from the ordained, or from denominational staff, or from self-proclaimed "experts," or from an intellectual elite.

With this in mind, let me suggest a Reformed model of leadership and authority as **biblically faithful, rightly-ordered service**. American Presbyterians, at least, have inherited a threefold polity of Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, Elders, and Deacons. Each of these three offices has an essential contribution to make to an adequately comprehensive understanding of church leadership. Some of the comments that follow have been informed by the very helpful recent Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly study on the *Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA)*.³⁵

If we are to take seriously the "ministry of the whole people of God," we need to begin with the conviction that in baptism, every member of Christ's body is anointed, gifted, and ordained by the Holy Spirit to do the work of the church's ministry. This starting point changes the focus of each of our three specially ordained leadership offices (Minister of the Word and Sacrament, Elder, Deacon). It puts that focus on modeling and embodying one aspect of authority and leadership that actually characterizes the ministry of the whole people of God. Following this line of thought, **Ministers of the Word and Sacrament** might be those who model and embody the church's concern for the biblical faithfulness that characterizes all genuine ministry. **Elders** might be those who model and embody the church's concern for the right ordering of its ministry, by discerning the Spirit's gifts in each member and empowering them for active participation in Christ's ministry. And **deacons** might be those who model and embody the church's concern to express its ministry in Christlike, self-sacrificial service.

Let's apply this same line of thought to the authority of broader governing bodies in the Reformed churches. If we do, the emphasis is shifted from perceived roles at the top or even the center of the church's life, or as power or money-brokers who "get really important things done" at high levels. Instead, broader governing bodies can begin to see themselves as biblically faithful servants of the congregation, who help the whole church maintain a rightly ordered church life under the ultimate authority of Jesus Christ, the true Leader. If this were to happen, the pattern of Christ's kingship might ground every level of leadership in the Reformed Churches.

C. A Prophetic Ministry

A third contemporary challenge is that every year, a higher percentage of Americans are unchurched. Recently, the Lilly Endowment funded a massive academic evaluation of the current challenges and opportunities facing the Presbyterian Church (USA). The faculty of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary were prominent in organizing this multi-volume study. The results are compiled in the final volume, called *The Re-forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism*.³⁶ The authors of that volume focus attention on an important new study of American patterns of church attendance that found that only 20-30% of the nation's population actually worship on any given Sunday. Apparently, even though a high percentage of Americans still claim faith in Christ, only a much smaller percentage are making any serious effort to pass on that faith to their children by regular church participation.³⁷ As these unchurched young people grow up, they will be without even a superficial knowledge of Christian beliefs and values.

This statistic brings the urgency of the church's participation in Christ's prophetic ministry into sharp focus. If Christ in his prophetic office is the One who embodies God's self-revelation to human beings, then the church has a special responsibility to make the God we know in Jesus Christ known to the world. That world — to which the gospel is largely foreign — is no longer on the frontiers of Western Christendom, if it ever was. In the 1990s it is at the church's very doorstep.³⁸ Simply put, in order to share in Christ's prophetic office, the church must be serious about mobilizing for evangelism.

American Christians can no longer assume that our neighbors know or understand the Christian message. But we should not conclude from this that they have no interest in the Gospel. Ours is an age in which even the goal of attaining truth has been largely abandoned, even at the most sophisticated levels of academia. The best response our dying culture can muster to the fragmentation of the common values we once shared is a pervasive relativism. In this climate, truth is regarded as context-dependent and even the idea of normatively evaluating another individual's or culture's perspective on an issue is seen as imperialistic and naive.

In contrast, a fundamental premise of Christ's prophetic ministry is his surprising, even offensive claim to be "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Some have suggested that for the church to be relevant in the face of our culture's growing relativism, this striking claim to uniqueness must be transcended or at least softened. But a fascinating recent national study indicated that the conviction that Jesus Christ is the unique source of salvation was the single best predictor of consistent church participation among baby boomers.³⁹ It is also a central tenet that is theologically explicit throughout the Reformed confession and catechisms.⁴⁰

Taking this claim seriously does not necessarily entail a narrowly exclusive interpretation of how a saving knowledge of Christ is bestowed on particular individuals by the Holy Spirit. Nor does it mean that the church has any right or reason to see itself as a smug group of insiders who possess the truth. To the contrary, one of the most prominent characteristics of God's Word as it was spoken through the prophets of the Old Testament was precisely its refusal to be captured, possessed, or perverted into a legitimation of the current religious status quo. By General revelation and common grace, the God Christians know in Jesus Christ is certainly at work throughout the world; evident in whatever good and truth can be found in various world-views and even in other religious perspectives.

But it does mean that Reformed Christians who embrace Christ's prophetic ministry will not hesitate to see Christ's Great Commission as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 as the heart and center of the church's ministry and mission. There the risen Christ himself gave the church its basis and its reason for being, when he said:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

 NOTES

¹(Ann Arbor: University Microfilm, 1991).

²*Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford, 1994).

³*Die christliche Lehre von der Dreieinigkeit und Menschwerdung Gottes in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, Vol. III (Tübingen: C.F. Osiander, 1843) see esp. 24 ff., 42 ff.

⁴*Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, especially chapter 3 and the Conclusion.

⁵*Opera Selecta* III, ed. P. Barth and W. Niesel (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1926); 1559 *Institutes* I.11-13.

⁶*Opera Selecta* III: 131; 1559 *Institutes* I.13.17. Calvin quotes Gregory (in Greek) from *Oratio* 40, 41: *In sanctum baptisma*. The passage was original in the 1539 *Institutes* in IV.28 (Cf. Richard F. Wevers, ed. *Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin 1539: Text and Concordance*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, 1988) 103.

⁷Cf. Torrance, *Theological Dialogue Between Orthodox and Reformed Churches*, ed. T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), esp. 3-18; "The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: Gregory Nazianzen and John Calvin," in *Calvin Studies V* (Davidson: Davidson College Presbyterian Church, 1990) 12-13; and "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," *Calvin's Theological Journal* 25:2 (Nov. '90) 190 ff. Torrance calls attention to Calvin's use of the Cyprianic expression *in solidum* (*Institutes* IV.2.6, IV.6.17, etc.), which he sees as a key to Calvin's understanding of the unity of the divine *hypostaseis*.

In this discussion of Calvin, we use the term *perichoresis* broadly, to refer to ways of understanding the unity of the three *hypostaseis* which focus on their mutual indwelling or inexistence, their intimate inter-relationship, and their constantly interacting co-operation. There is, of course, an implied contrast with more typically "Western" approaches which assume the unity of God as "given" and concentrate on explaining theoretically how this God can exist in three persons.

⁸*Commentary on the Gospel of John* on 14:10, ed. A. Tholuck, Amsterdam Edition (Berlin: Gustavum Eichler, 1833). The fact that the Spirit is not mentioned is a function of the text to which Calvin is responding. However, note the emphasis on the mutual exercise of divine power, in light of Calvin's description of the Spirit as the efficacy and power of God's action.

⁹At the dawn of the Reformation, Martin Luther articulated this insight as a direct challenge to hierarchical, clergy-centered understandings of access to God that had developed in the church during the Middle Ages. He perceived a "detestable tyranny of clergy over the laity" ("The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 36 [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959] 112 f.); a tyranny that revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of ministry. His alternative, drawn from the biblical book of Hebrews, was based on the conviction that Jesus Christ himself is the ultimate "high priest" who gives all believers access to God. So human intermediaries are not required. The implication, drawn from I Peter 2:9, is that in Christ, all believers share in Christ's priesthood:

Let all...who know themselves to be Christians be assured of this: that we are all equally priests, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and Sacraments. However, let no one make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. (For what is the common property of all, we may not arrogate to ourselves, unless we are called.) And therefore the "sacrament" of ordination, if it is anything at all, is nothing else than a certain rite

whereby one is called to the ministry of the church. ("Misuse of the Mass," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 36, 116, cf. 138).

I have set several statements in the plural to avoid gender-exclusive language here.

¹⁰1559 *Institutes* IV.1928. I cite from the English translation of F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

¹¹Cf. Klauspeter Blaser, "Calvins Lehre von den drei Amtern Christi," *Theologische Studien* 105, Zürich, 1970.

¹²The order in which each aspect of the threefold office was discussed changed over the course of Calvin's life and throughout the history of the Reformed tradition. In the Geneva Catechism, the order was king, priest, and prophet, perhaps due to an unreflective addition of the prophetic ministry to the already existing Lutheran diad of king and priest (cf. J.F. Jansen, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Work of Christ* [London: James Clarke, 1956] 23-38). By the 1559 *Institutes*, Calvin had more deliberately adopted the order prophet, king, priest. Eventually, the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy settled upon the now familiar order of prophet, priest, and king, as in the Heidelberg Catechism. More recently, Karl Barth introduced yet another intentional change in *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, tr. Geoffrey Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-60), adopting the order priest, king, prophet. As may be imagined, dogmatic nuances and strategies of theological presentation vary according to the order adopted.

¹³*Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. G. Baum, E. Kunitz, E. Ruess (Brunsvigae, Berlin, 1863-1900) Vol. 34:19.

¹⁴*Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, chapter 6.

¹⁵CR 34:21-22.

¹⁶I have sought to show the influence of Calvin's Geneva Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism on Barth's treatment of Reconciliation in Volume IV of the *Church Dogmatics* in "Two Early Reformed Catechisms, the Threefold Office, and the Shape of Karl Barth's Christology" in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991) 195-214.

¹⁷CR 34:19-22.

¹⁸*Institutes* II.15.6.

¹⁹1559 *Institutes* II.15.6.

²⁰Cf. James Torrance, "The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship," *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 348-369; "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ," in *The Incarnation*, ed. T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1981) 127-147; "The Vicarious Humanity and Priesthood of Christ in the Theology of John Calvin," in *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor*, ed. W. Neuser (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1978) 69-84.

²¹1559 *Institutes* II.15.6.

²²"The Heidelberg Catechism," in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA): Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Office of the General Assembly, 1991) 4.031.

²³1559 *Institutes* I.15.5.

²⁴*Book of Confessions* 8.23.

²⁵*Church Dogmatics*, IV.1-3.

²⁶*Book of Confessions* 4.032. Cf. the German original in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985r) 318: "Weil ich durch den Glauben ein Gleid (limb, member, link) Christi..."

²⁷Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, tr. G. Williard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 177.

²⁸Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 178.

²⁹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV, tr. Geoffrey Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-60); cf. my article "Two Early Reformed Catechisms, the Threefold Office, and the Shape of Karl Barth's Christology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44:2 (1991) 195-214.

³⁰ Cf. for one helpful identification and discussion of this challenge the recent paper *An Awkward Church* (Louisville: Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 5, Presbyterian Church USA, 1993), by Douglas John Hall.

³¹*Institutes* I.15.6.

³²Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. Robert Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 316.

³³*Institutes* II.15.4.

³⁴*Institutes* II.15.4.

³⁵*A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA)* (Louisville: The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, 1992).

³⁶ed. M. Coalter, J. Mulder, L. Weeks (Louisville, WJK, 1992).

³⁷*Ibid.* 67-89.

³⁸Cf. Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Washington: The Alban Institute, 1991) esp. 8-29.

³⁹Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993).

⁴⁰For the most recent confessional reaffirmation of this central tenet, see "The Confession of 1967," *The Book of Confessions* 9.10.