

### *Prophet, Priest, and King*

I wish that I could at least tell you who wrote *Hebrews*, or that I could tell you when it was written, or even to whom, but I can't. That is all lost to the mists of time.

Tom Long writes, "Imagine being handed a book today with the comment, 'Here, you may enjoy this. It was written in America, or Russia, or France, I'm not sure, by a Jew or a Gentile, anyway, it was written sometime between 1920 and 1970. Enjoy.'"<sup>1</sup>

I have a strong hunch that it is not an overstatement to say that every time a Presbyterian pastor prepares to preach a text from the letter to the Hebrews, there is a theology professor from one seminary or another lurking in the background quoting Calvin to them. It's a specific quote from Calvin, too: "To know the purpose for which Christ was sent by the Father, and what he conferred upon us, we must look above all else at three things in him: the prophetic office, kingship and priesthood."<sup>2</sup>

This is the title of the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, and he goes on to add this, "In order that faith may find a firm basis for salvation in Christ, and thus rest in him, this principle must be laid down: the office enjoined upon Christ by the Father consists of three parts. For he was given to be prophet, king and priest."<sup>3</sup>

Before we unpack that, I want to give Calvin a nod as to why this particular division of labor is important: These are the three offices to which individuals were anointed in the Old Testament: prophet, priest and king.

The word, *Christ*, as I have told you, simply means *anointed*.

If we are to understand Christ, we must understand his role.

Now, I have accepted the reality that we don't sit around thinking about the three-fold office of messiah in the letter to the Hebrews. I am aware that we probably don't ingest Calvin with our cornflakes.

But we do rely on God in our daily lives – in the hard moments, when we are trying to figure out what sort of person we need to be, and what we need to do, in the crisis moments when we want to know that there are ultimate things on which we can rely, and also in the midst of the

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<sup>1</sup> Long, Thomas. Hebrews in *Interpretation*. (JKP, Louisville, 1997) p2

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, John. The Institutes of the Christian Religion, McNeill, ed. (Westminster, Philadelphia, MCMLX) p494

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

humdrum, day to day, boring realities in which faith is simply the background music of our lives – there, but not maybe on the *front* of our brains.

In other words, just like Calvin said, *faith* rests in Christ.

The portion of Hebrews that we read today focuses on Christ's priestly office, but I don't know that I think it is all that helpful for us to divide up the work of Christ into component parts, so today I would like for us to concentrate on having a better understanding of Jesus's life as *prophet, priest and king*.

Let's assume *Hebrews* was written in the first century, to someone familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures.

On that basis of that knowledge, we know what a prophet is.

A prophet is someone that God appointed, or anointed, so God has a mouthpiece in the world.

We sometimes think of prophecy in terms of foretelling the future – indeed, there is a tendency for Christians to think of all prophecy as foretelling the coming of Jesus, but in much larger measure, it's not.

Generally, prophecy in the Bible refers to those who come to speak the truth to power.

We know the minor and major prophets of the Old Testament as the ones who came with dire warnings on their lips.

Those warnings differed depending on the prophet's era. Elijah took on the prophets of Ba'al, warning the Israelites against idolatry and placing their trust in fake Gods.

Samuel had the unhappy task of confronting the king with his adulterous affair.

Later, the major and minor prophets railed against the kings of Israel for having abandoned God's way for the people and warned that military conquest was coming.

The message was specific to every age. But here is what the prophets had in common: it was a terrible job.

In the early days of train travel before safety regulations came into effect, the Sears and Roebuck Catalogue carried a wooden leg available for purchase called, "the Brakeman's Friend," because so many railroad brakemen lost limbs in that industry. You would think with so many people losing their limbs, people would stop taking the job, but apparently that wasn't so. The compulsion, then as now, to feed oneself and one's family compelled enough people to need to the job that there were enough people to have casualties to compel Sears and Roebuck to catalogue-market a prosthetic limb.

That is sort of what it was like to be a prophet.

Prophets didn't tend to be popular.

Prophets didn't tend to live to old age.

Given the number of them who felt compelled to preach at *all* times, you probably wouldn't want one for a neighbor. A great number of prophets harangued God for making them prophets.

The priest job is a *little* better in the Bible.

As long as you were an honest priest – and apparently those could be in short supply – you got to keep a portion of the animal sacrifice that was to be offered to God.

But – and this is key – it wasn't a barbeque. It was a subsistence culture, so a portion was burned for God, a portion was allocated to the priest, and the giver got the rest to feed their family.

Priesthood also could be a rather dangerous profession. For instance, once a year, a high priest would be chosen by lot to go into the Holy of Holies. That's the most sacred part of the Jerusalem temple. They would go behind the curtain to the dwelling place of God on earth. There, they must be prepared to encounter the transcendent God. It was a great honor to be chosen. But here's the catch: the other priests always tied a rope around the ankle of the priest sent back in there, just in case he dropped dead of fright or an immanent encounter with God. That way they could haul the carcass out without risking anyone else's life.

I'm not sure I'd be so keen on being the priest under those circumstances.

Well, kingship at least should be a slam-dunk, right?

Not so much. It was good to be the king if you were King David or King Solomon. There are of course, several notorious indiscretions for which these kings are known, but the kingdom was healthy, the foreign invaders were held off, and they died as old men in their beds.

But if you're Jehoiakim or Jehoiachin around the time of the collapse, they do bad things to the kings. The victorious foreign invaders would – well let's just say they do bad things. I don't need to get graphic with it.

So, we have this model of prophet, priest and king, and if we're honest, it is riddled with reasons one wouldn't touch the job with a ten-foot pole!

I suspect the modern understanding of each is probably no better than an ancient one:

The prophet may well be a bigoted loudmouth,

The priest may be about as relevant as Reverend Lovejoy from *The Simpsons*,

And the King... well, Americans don't have a great track-record with royalty.

But what if...

The prophet is the one who tells us the truth when nobody else will,

The priest is the one who intercedes to God for us when we've run out of hope,

And the king is the one who will never, ever leave us uncared for?

Calvin said this too, “Thus it is that we may patiently pass through this life with its misery, hunger, cold, contempt, reproaches and other troubles – content with this one thing: that our King will never leave us destitute, but will provide for all our needs until, our warfare ended, we are called to triumph. Such is the nature of his rule, that he shares with us all that he has received from the Father.”<sup>4</sup>

This was not a prophet, priest or king like any the Israelites had encountered before.

This is not a prophet, priest or king like any *we* have ever encountered before.

This is God as both prophet and rescuer,

This is God as both priest and sacrifice,

This is God as both king and servant,

In other words, this isn't like anything else.

Jesus isn't like anyone else.

These terms get thrown around to describe Jesus quite a bit.

But the truth is that more than whatever we could ask or imagine of the *best* of these things is true of Jesus because in Jesus the fullness of God chose to dwell.

We do well to remember that title *Christ* means *the anointed one*, and the tasks to which Jesus are anointed are tasks none of us want:

The priest becomes the sacrifice,

The prophet is mocked to identify who is hitting him,

The king gets a crown of thorns.

The letter to the Hebrews seeks to help us understand Jesus Christ, and at the heart of understanding Christ's work is to know that God is in the middle of it all.

There is a great mystery to the workings of God's plan for salvation.

It's not mysterious in that it is secretive, it is mysterious in that God is always transcendent, beyond our knowing, and yet, also immanent, so close to us as to take on flesh and become incarnate.

We're speaking of holy mysteries now, and yet *even* in the midst of holy mysteries, Calvin tells us that *we* are drafted into Christ's priesthood.

Jesus himself tells his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 499

And that means that we, too, are called to tell the truth, to be servants, and to care for the uncared-for.

And the challenge for me, for you, for all of us, is this: Are we doing our best?

So often, am I am as guilty of this as anyone, we want to make church *undemanding*. I shared an article from *the Atlantic* last week that said, in a nutshell, that the pandemic is getting on everyone's last nerve, and as a result our brains are slower and we are less receptive to the very things we most need to process.

So, surely now more than ever, we want to make Christian discipleship easy and we rest on that old text that Jesus's burden is easy and his yoke is light.

And it's true, they are. They are easy and light because we are joined to Christ in his work.

Get that: Christ is not yoked to do our pleasure, we are joined to Christ to do his work.

That means his work of truth-telling, caring, servanthood, and my question for you and for me is this: Are we doing our best?

As we prepare for Easter, are we doing our best?

Gardner C. Taylor tells the story of a terrible storm on Lake Michigan in which a ship was wrecked near the shore. A Northwestern University student, Edmond Spenser, went into the raging water again and again and single-handedly rescued seventeen people. When friends carried him to his room, nearly exhausted and fainting, he kept asking them, "Did I do my best?"<sup>5</sup>

We are joined to Christ in his work... as prophet, priest, and king...

Truth-teller, sacrificial giver, caregiver to the uncared-for.

We know what those words mean. We know what we're to do. And while it is often right to ask these questions of ourselves as a body, sometimes we need to turn the question on ourselves *individually*.

Are you doing your best?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Taylor, Gardner C. *His Own Clothes* in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, Long and Plantinga, eds. (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994) p294