

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Randall E. Otto

Baptism and the *Munus Triplex*

Dr Otto is pastor of West Grove Presbyterian Church, PA, and teaches philosophy and religion at Southwestern College, Wichita, KS; he has previously written for this journal on the theology of Jonathan Edwards.

Key words: Baptism; Calvin; Calvinism; *munus triplex*; Reformed theology.

The *munus triplex*, or threefold office of Christ, has been a standard Reformed means of delineating the work of Christ as prophet, priest, and king ever since Calvin formulated it in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (II, xv, i-vi). Among Reformed confessional statements, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) defines 'Christ' in terms of the threefold office and 'Christian' as participation in the *munus triplex*. Thus, Jesus is called 'Christ', i.e., the 'Anointed One', 'because he is ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be *our chief Prophet and Teacher*, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be *our only High Priest*, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be *our eternal King*, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us' (Q. 31). A 'Christian' is so called, '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 against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures' (Q. 32). Curiously, the Heidelberg Catechism, as well as Zacharias Ursinus's *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (1591) and most subsequent expositions of Reformed theology, fail to connect this 'sharing in Christ' and 'anointing' with baptism.¹

1 The standard compendium of classical Reformed theology, Heinrich Heppes's *Reformed Dogmatics* (London, 1950 rep.), does not link the *munus triplex* either with Christ's baptism or with the Christian's in its sections on Christ's mediatorial work or baptism. It joins but one of Christ's offices, that of prophet, to his baptism by John, saying, 'Christ's public prophetic function began with the full participation of his humanity in it, from the moment he was baptized by John' (456).

The threefold office is generally introduced in Reformed theology texts under the rubric of the death and atoning work of Christ.² How does one participate in the death of Christ, however, except by baptism? 'All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death' (Rom 6:3). Baptism serves as an apt metaphor of Jesus' death (Lk. 12:50), though Reformed theology, following Calvin, has generally viewed baptism more in terms of washing than of death, burial, and resurrection.³

The significance of baptism also includes identification with and submission to God's Word, anointing with God's Spirit, and confirmation as God's son. Each of these three aspects of baptism may be subsumed under the threefold office of Christ to include those who 'share in Christ and thus in his anointing' through baptism as prophet, priest, and king. It will be maintained here that Jesus' baptism served just these three functions. While Jesus' baptism *uniquely* served to identify him with God's Word and submission to it as a prophet, to anoint him with God's Spirit as a priest, and to confirm him as God's Son and thus king, the Christian shares in each of these callings by means of baptism.

1. Baptism as Identification with and Submission to God's Word: The Calling of a Prophet

Each of the synoptic gospels portrays John the Baptist 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3; cf. Mt. 3:6-11). When Jesus came to receive this baptism, however, John 'tried to deter him' (Mt. 3:14), saying it was he who needed baptism by Jesus, not vice versa. Jesus had no need of repentance or forgiveness, being without sin according to the tradition (Acts 3:14; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 7:26; 1 Pet. 1:19); thus, Jesus' baptism may not have signified for him precisely what it did for all others who came. Since Jesus was *not* coming for baptism to receive forgiveness of sin, it is difficult to accept the common view that Jesus' purpose in baptism was

2 Most recently, for example, Donald K. McKim, *Introducing the Reformed Faith* (Louisville, 2001), 94, after discussing theories of the atonement and the death of Christ. Daniel Migliore uses the threefold office as a way of interweaving the various theories of the atonement (*Faith Seeking Understanding* [Grand Rapids, 1991], 155).

3 Hughes O. Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, 1992), 173-74. Note the repeated focus on washing in The Heidelberg Catechism, Questions 69-73, as also in The Second Helvetic Confession, chapter 20.

to identify with the people in their need.⁴ Furthermore, if Jesus was without sin and thus need of repentance, it is also difficult to see how his being baptized could set an example for his followers.⁵

Jesus' reply, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness' (Mt. 3:15) suggests his baptism was necessary for that particular point in time ('now') in fulfilment of a divine command. That divine command, it may be surmised, was that Jesus identify himself with John and stand as the culmination of the entire prophetic line (cf. Mt. 11:11-15) which had declared God's 'righteousness'. Baptism identified Jesus with John and this prophetic line. It marked Jesus out as a disciple of John and served as Jesus' public call to be the consummate prophet.⁶ In going through the Jordan in baptism with John, the antitype of the Elijah tradition, Jesus may also have recapitulated the conferral of the double share of God's Spirit that came upon Elisha as he succeeded Elijah as head of the prophetic community (2 Kgs. 2:6-9), a call which 'was to become a paradigm of charismatic succession' and 'also served as a model for discipleship in early Christianity'.⁷ The fact that Jesus, after citing Is. 61:1-2 about the anointing of the Spirit for proclamation, goes on to criticize his fellow Nazarenes ('no prophet is accepted in his hometown') with allusion to the Elijah-Elisha tradition (Lk. 4:16-27) suggests this idea of succession (as also Luke's placement of John's imprisonment *before* Jesus' baptism, 3:20).⁸

In baptism, then, Jesus identifies himself as an adherent of John and the entire prophetic line, embracing the law and the prophets which he came not to abolish, but to fulfill (Mt. 5:17).

Assuming that John had indeed recognized Jesus as the Coming One, we would wonder what other response he could have made than to object, 'I need to be baptized by you', that is, 'I need to

4 As, e.g., Donald Hagner, *Matthew* (WBC; Dallas, 1993), 1:57, following George Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1962), 45-67.

5 As, e.g., Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, 1984), 51. Other suggested interpretations may be found in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* ICC (Edinburgh, 1988), 1:321-23. Their own suggestion, that Jesus went to John to 'receive a pledge of ultimate deliverance . . . from the imminent eschatological flood' is not persuasive.

6 Davies and Allison (*Matthew*, 1:326) consider such an interpretation 'the most convincing' in light of Matthew's persistent use of *pleroō* for OT prophetic fulfilment, together with the OT prophetic allusions in the baptismal event itself.

7 Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (2nd ed.; Louisville, 1996), 63.

8 Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)* (AB; New York, 1970), 530.

become *your* disciple'. Jesus' counter-argument that he needed to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:15) is congruent with this interpretation, since 'doing righteousness', in the Old Testament sense meant 'carrying out the will of God'. Jesus, as the righteous man, would naturally see alignment with and submission to God's prophet as necessary in order to do God's will.⁹

'Now' thus signifies the transition then occurring from the old covenant culminating in John, the last of the great OT prophets, to the new covenant and the ministry of Jesus 'the prophet'. Jesus regarded his ministry as in continuity with, and bringing to a climax, the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament, culminating in John the Baptist.¹⁰ Inasmuch as a particular *call* was necessary to be a prophet, as well as continuity with the teaching of the great prophetic tradition, it would have been necessary for Jesus to receive baptism by John to indicate his continuity with the OT proclamation of God's word and will. That Jesus received at baptism a vision of heaven being *opened* is in keeping with the prophetic call (Mt. 3:16; cf. Ezk. 1:1; Acts 10:11), as is his endowment with the Spirit.¹¹

In his baptism, then, Jesus identifies *not so much with sinners*, but rather *with God*, submitting to the call of God to proclaim his righteousness, 'to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption'. Similarly, when sinners *repent*, they change their perspective (*metanoē*) from the fallen human will to sin by taking the holy divine will to righteousness. Their baptism thus signifies and seals the call of God upon them to 'share in Christ and thus in his anointing' so they 'may confess his name' in lives of faithful obedience, endeavoring to fulfill all God's expectations for righteous living.

Those who are Christians merely in appearance are those who have been baptized, and who are in the company of those who are called, and profess the Christian faith; but are without conversion. . . . Those are true christians [*sic*] who are not only baptized and profess the doctrine of Christ, but who are also possessed of a true faith, and declare this by the fruits of repentance; or, they are those who are members of Christ by a true faith, and are made partakers of his anointing.¹²

Baptism is thus a public identification with and submission to God's Word in Jesus Christ. As the *Directory for Worship* (W-2.3006) of

9 William B. Badke, 'Was Jesus a Disciple of John?', *EQ* 62 (1990), 200.

10 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 167.

11 M. Eugene Boring, 'Prophecy (Early Christianity)', *ABD* 5:498.

12 Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ, n.d.), 176.

the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) says, 'baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world.' It is, therefore, the responsibility of all who have been baptized, who have identified themselves with God and his Word, to take on the prophetic role to speak on behalf of God and his righteous will in both word and deed.

2. Baptism Signifies Anointing with God's Spirit: The Calling of a Priest

Jesus' baptism was accompanied by the descent of the Spirit of God upon him, anointing, consecrating, and gifting him for the ministry to which God had called him. One strand of tradition embodied in *Test. Levi* (second century B.C.) associates ideas found in Jesus' baptism with the 'new priest to whom all the words of the Lord will be revealed' (18:2): 'The heavens will be opened, and from the temple of glory sanctification will come upon him, with a fatherly voice, as from Abraham to Isaac, and the glory of the Most High will burst forth upon him. And the spirit of understanding and sanctification shall rest upon him [in the water]' (18:6-7). That an early correlation was seen between this priestly anointing and Jesus' baptism is evidenced by the words 'in the water', which are 'apparently an interpolation based on Jesus' having received the spirit at baptism'.¹³

Baptism is a consecration to service precisely because of the working of the Holy Spirit in and through the water. Anointing was a ceremony by which prophets, priests, and kings were set apart by God for their offices in the OT. As Ursinus notes,¹⁴ anointing signified: 1. 'An ordination, or calling, to the office for which they were thus set apart.' Luke's observation that Jesus was 'about thirty years old when he began his ministry' (Lk. 3:23), occurring as it does right after his baptism, may suggest his anointing at baptism was a call to priestly ministry, since that is the age at which Levitical priests began their ministries (Nu. 4:3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47). 2. 'It signified the promise and bestowment of the gifts necessary' for their calling. The coming of the Spirit upon individuals is correlated in Scripture prior to Pentecost with the gift of wisdom (Gn. 41:38-40; Nu. 7:18; Jdg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29), special skills (Ex. 28:3; 31:3) and unusual physical strength (Jdg. 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14). The Spirit that came upon the Servant

13 Howard C. Kee, "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Garden City, NY, 1983), 1:795n.

14 *Ibid.*, 170.

in Is. 61, quoted in Lk. 4:18-19 in reference to Jesus, is intended to restore Israel to its initial covenantal role (Ex. 19:6) as 'priests of the Lord' and 'ministers of our God' (Is. 61:6).

While there is no agreement on the role of the dove as a theophany of the Spirit that descends upon Jesus,¹⁵ one suggestion with priestly significance is 'that the dove-like appearance is intended to trigger off thoughts of the function of the dove as the sin-offering for the poor in the levitical sacrificial system (Lv. 5:7; cf. Jn. 2:14, 16).'¹⁶ More likely, the dove may be a symbol of the peace that Jesus was and came to bring (Eph. 2:14-17), in contradistinction to the 'priestly involvement in war' found in the Deuteronomistic ideology and made 'more prominent' in the Books of Chronicles.¹⁷

In his baptism, Peter says, 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power' (Acts 10:37-38). That power was immediately demonstrated in Jesus' overcoming the devil in the wilderness and ultimately in his triumph on the cross as 'our only High Priest, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father'.

Although Martin Bucer's reform of the baptismal rite at Strasbourg in 1524 eliminated 'the prebaptismal and postbaptismal anointings' as a primitive church superstition,¹⁸ there was never any question for the Reformers that, as a sacrament, baptism is a means of grace *because of the work, or anointing, of the Holy Spirit*. The Westminster Confession says, 'the grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments is not conferred by any power in them', but instead is contingent 'upon the work of the Spirit.' Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers and their children by the working of the Spirit.

As disciples of the Christ, Christians share in Jesus' anointing. Just as Jesus in his baptism was 'anointed with the Holy Spirit to undertake the way of the servant manifested in his sufferings, death, and resurrection' (*Directory for Worship* 2.300), so Christians are in their baptism anointed with the Holy Spirit to take up their cross and follow Jesus as God's servants.

Just as the Spirit furnished Jesus at baptism with gifts for his priestly offering up of himself, so the Spirit furnishes believers and their children with the gifts necessary to offer themselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God (Rom 12:1). Baptism thus signifies

15 See, e.g., Fitzmyer, *Luke (LIX)*, 483-484 for the range of suggestions.

16 Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL, 1996), 47.

17 Cf. Horst D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology* (OTL; Louisville, 1996), 2:53-54.

18 Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 55.

anointing with God's Spirit to serve sacrificially in the ministry of the 'royal priesthood' (1 Pet 2:9).

3. Baptism Signifies Confirmation as God's Son: The Calling of a King

At his baptism, Jesus hears a voice from heaven confirming him as God's Son, in whom God is well pleased (Mt. 3:17; Mk. 1:11; Lk. 3:22). This confirmation is a quote from Ps 2:7, a royal psalm used in the coronation of Davidic kings, confirming their place as the Lord's 'Anointed One' (Ps 2:2), his 'King installed on Zion' (Ps 2:6), God's 'Son' (Ps 2:7). As God's representative and vicegerent, the Davidic king was spoken of as God's son (cf. 2 Sa. 7:14).

In the case of Jesus, God the Son incarnate, the titular significance of 'son' applied to previous Davidic kings is heightened by the ontological significance of his being of one essence with God. In John's gospel, after Jesus is baptized and anointed with the Holy Spirit, he makes his first disciples in Galilee. In response to Jesus' prescience, 'Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel"' (Jn. 1:49). Similarly, in Mt. 4:17 and Mk. 1:15, after Jesus' baptism and victory over the devil in the wilderness, he comes forth preaching 'the kingdom of heaven [or 'of God'] is near'. In God's Son, the King and the kingdom are near.

The whole point of it was that Israel's dream was coming true *right now*. Equally important, it could never be divorced from the person and deeds of the proclaimer. This will have been as true for John the Baptist as for Jesus. *This* baptism is the 'getting-ready-for-the-kingdom' baptism; *this* proclamation is the one that is actually inaugurating the kingdom.¹⁹

In his baptism, then, Jesus is anointed king and already declared God's Son. Thus he is 'our eternal King, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us.'

Jesus promised his disciples a rule unlike that of the Gentiles, one in which they serve, but also judge righteously. What Matthew specifies as rule by the twelve in the *palingenesia* (Mt. 19:28) is in Luke's account a more generalized rule in 'the kingdom' (22:29). Moreover, Luke's placement of this conferral (*diatithemai*, 'to issue a decree', 'to make a covenant', 'to confer') of the kingdom *after* the representation of the new covenant in the institution of the Lord's Supper implies a linkage of receiving the cup (and its own significance as a

19 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 228.

form of baptism, Lk. 12:50; cf. Mk. 10:38-40) with some kind of rule in the New Israel. This responsibility for rule and judgment among those identified with Jesus in the sacrament(s) extends not only to the church (1 Cor. 5:12), but beyond the church to the world and even angels (1 Cor. 6:1-3) as part of the faithful believers' "reign with him" (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26-27) in sitting on the very throne of Christ (Rev. 3:21).

Those who follow Jesus in baptism and share 'in his anointing' are responsible to 'fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures.' As heirs together with him, it is the Christian's duty to rule over all things, not just 'hereafter' 'in eternity', but here and now, according to the stewardship given humanity in creation to rule over all things as God's representatives. Traditionally known as the *cultural mandate* (Gn. 1:26; Ps. 8:4-8), Christians have, by virtue of their baptism, a calling and a responsibility to bring all things under the Lordship and dominion of Jesus Christ. As 'the disciples were empowered by the outpouring of the Spirit to undertake a life of service and to be an inclusive worshipping community, sharing life in which love, justice, and mercy abounded' (*Directory for Worship* 2.3002), so Christians in all ages are to work for the reconciliation of humanity that is testified in 'the bond of unity' they have in baptism (*Directory for Worship* 2.3005). Believing adults confirm this regal calling personally in their baptism; their baptized children confirm it when they become adults. For Calvin, baptism necessitated instruction in the faith unto proper Christian living.

The purpose of catechetical instruction was to prepare the child to make an intelligent profession of faith. It was the profession of faith implied, even demanded, by the baptism of the child. Just as the living of the Christian life was demanded by baptism, so was the profession of Christian faith. The solemn profession of faith was the logical working out of the sacrament of baptism.²⁰

The confirmation of Jesus as God's Son and thus as King is a calling those baptized in Jesus' name confirm and share as heirs together with him.

20 Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 224. It should be noted, however, that Calvin did not follow Martin Bucer in developing a Reformed rite of confirmation. 'Confirmation was an offense to Calvin because it, like penance, sapped the meaning of baptism. . . . Confirmation tended to take away the positive aspects of baptism as a sign of spiritual renewal and the gift of the Holy Spirit. For Calvin baptism was a sign under which the whole of the Christian life was to be lived' (*ibid.*, 225).

Conclusion

The baptism of Jesus by John signals the public commencement of Jesus' calling as prophet, priest and king. Karl Barth rightly noted that Jesus *was born* to the ministry of prophet, priest, and king; this 'does not mean that He was not yet the Messiah, Prophet, Priest and King, that He had not yet begun His ministry, that He received and entered upon His office only with His baptism in the Jordan.'²¹ Indeed, Reformed theology has maintained that 'Christ was never not a prophet, as he was never not a saviour and mediator. But he was chiefly so when he appeared in the flesh'.²² He was publicly validated as prophet, priest, and king in his baptism.

As this act of His the baptism of Jesus was, in a typical and decisive way for His whole history, the first and basic act of His self-proclamation as the mediator between God and men. In it the ministry of reconciling the world to God began to take place, and to do so indeed as His own history. In it He came forward as the One in whose person and work all that John had announced—the kingdom, judgment and forgiveness of God—was now to take place.²³

It is worth noting that the three aspects of John's preaching Barth sees fulfilled in Jesus' baptism, the kingdom, judgment, and forgiveness, correspond well to the *munus triplex* and the functions of king, prophet, and priest, respectively. It was to these offices that Jesus was born and publicly acclaimed in his baptism. It is to these offices that followers of Jesus are born and publicly acclaimed in their baptism.

Abstract

The *munus triplex*, or threefold office of Christ, has been a standard Reformed means of delineating the work of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. This article develops the significance of the offices for Christian participation in Christ's work through baptism. Baptism includes identification with and submission to God's Word, anointing with God's Spirit, and confirmation as God's son. Each of these three aspects of baptism may be subsumed under the threefold office of Christ to include those who 'share in Christ and thus in his anointing' through baptism as prophet, priest, and king. While Jesus' baptism *uniquely* served to identify him with God's Word and submission to it as a prophet, to anoint him with God's Spirit as a priest, and to confirm him as God's Son and thus king, the Christian shares in each of these callings by means of baptism.

21 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, 1960), III/2, 57.

22 Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 455.

23 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, 1969), IV/4, 61.