

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 15

TO KNOW THE PURPOSE FOR WHICH CHRIST WAS SENT BY THE FATHER, AND WHAT HE CONFERRED
UPON US, WE MUST LOOK ABOVE ALL AT THE THREE THINGS IN HIM: THE PROPHETIC OFFICE,
KINGSHIP, AND PRIESTHOOD

In this chapter Calvin examines the “three offices” which the Reformation believed that Jesus held; prophet, priest and king. Each one sheds a slightly different light on what Jesus accomplished in his earthly ministry.

Summary: As always, Calvin believes that the examination of these offices is not merely an interesting theological/Biblical exercise but that it will help believers “*find a firm foundation for salvation in Christ.*” (pg. 494)

The Prophetic Office: Calvin first takes up the prophetic office, by which he means that Christ was the last and greatest of the prophets. The work of prophets, according to Calvin was to set forth “*useful doctrine sufficient for salvation*” (pg. 495) such that the people would hope for the coming messiah in order to have a full understanding of God. What this means is that while the prophets offered insights into God and God’s desire for humanity, it would be Christ and Christ alone, who would show them the ultimate truth. “*That is, outside Christ there is nothing worth knowing, and all who by faith perceive what he is like have grasped the whole immensity of heavenly benefits...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.*” (pg. 496)

The Kingly Office: This second office is the one on which Calvin spends most of the chapter. This may be because, for Calvin, God is seen as the one power in the universe, therefore Jesus ought to be seen most clearly as a king exercising power. The exercise of Christ’s power shines forth as Jesus “*...enriches his people with all things necessary for eternal salvation of souls and fortifies them with courage to stand unconquerable against all assaults of spiritual enemies. From this we infer that he rules - inwardly and outwardly – more for our sake than his.*” (pg. 498) This ruling is possible because “*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...and surely to say, that he (Jesus) sits at the right hand of the Father is equivalent to calling him the Father’s deputy, who has in his possession the whole power of God’s dominion.*” (pg. 500) Jesus is therefore king because he has all power and uses it to wonderfully both care for God’s people and to ultimately judge the world; both of which are the purview of an earthly king (care and judgment).

The Priestly Office: The office of Priest is necessary for Calvin because he believes that, “*God’s righteous curse bars our access to him, and God in his capacity as judge is angry toward us. Hence, an expiation must intervene...*” (pg. 501) That expiation/intervention comes through Jesus who “*...as priest may obtain God’s favor for us and appease God’s wrath.*” (pg. 501) Jesus obtained God’s favor for us through his death on the cross, thus becoming both priest and sacrifice. Christ “*...having washed away our sins, sanctifies us and obtains for us that grace which...our transgressions and vices debar us.*” (pg. 502) Calvin also reminds us that Jesus’ work on the cross as priest/sacrifice, not only saves us but that it makes us priests as well. “*Now Christ plays the priestly role, not only to render the Father favorable...toward us...but also to receive us as his (Jesus’) companions in this great office.*” (pg. 502) Thus we become part of the priesthood of all believers.

Reflection: It is easy for us to see Jesus as a one-dimensional character; that he only accomplished one thing; such as salvation, or forgiveness, or as an exemplar of faith. Our Reformed tradition offers us a far more complex and nuanced view. Jesus, as Calvin points out, fills multiple roles to accomplish the task of bringing the Kingdom of the God into the world. In addition, he is the role model for prophet, priest and king; a model on which all others ought to base their work. My hope is that the discussion of these roles will expand your understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus accomplished.

Questions

1. Which of these offices means the most to you and why?
2. What assurance for your own life of faith do you find in these offices?
3. What does it mean to you to know that you are a “priest”?