O.T. Motif, Prophet, Priest, & King is Fulfilled in Jesus

By Rev. Stephen A. Smarowsky

In Old Testament history, God always provided 3 roles of leadership for His people: prophet, priest, and king.

Prophet

It is first and foremost important to realize that the key role of a prophet was not to tell the future, but just to speak truth. Yes, prophets spoke of future events, but it was not their key function. Therefore, the key function of a prophet was to speak God’s truth to God’s people. The prophet was often despised and his life was sought after because he would speak things that people would not want to hear. The prophet was always concerned with truth, no matter what. The main concern for the prophet was that truth was known and taught even at the stake of hurting people spiritually, emotionally, and physically (disadvantage for a prophetic person). The prophet usually went against the grain. Today, it is good to have a “prophet” (one who will speak truth whether you want to hear it or not) in your circle. The prophetic type of person is discerning and helpful for pointing out our errors.

Priest

In the Old Testament the priest was the guy who was always concerned with the people. The priest was the guy that was interceding on behalf of God’s people before God for their sin. The priest would carry the burden of God’s people. While the priest was concerned with the people, He was not so concerned with truth. The priest is the guy who would look over truth for the sake of someone’s feelings (disadvantage of the priestly person). Again,
today it is good to have a priestly person in your circle. The priest is going to live with you, cry with you, laugh with you, talk with you, spend time with you, empathize and sympathize with you, and pray for you.

King

The king, in the Old Testament, was the guy who would organize armies of men and oversee their work. The king was not worried with small details as much as he was worried with the bigger picture. The king was rarely on the front lines, but most of the time was in control. The king was usually liked and charismatic. It was the king’s role to lead God’s people. Today, it would be wise to have a king in your circle. The king was usually full of pride and full of himself (disadvantages of the kingly person), but this is the guy who would help you to see the big picture and perhaps organize a plan to get to where you want to be.

Jesus came to fulfill all that was anticipated of Him in the Scriptures. One helpful way developed by John Calvin is to recognize that three primary offices are woven throughout the Old Testament: prophet, priest and king. (Calvin, John, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Henry Beveridge, vol. 2, 15.) Each of these Old Testament offices are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

It will be important to maintain all three aspects of his work not resting on one so that the others are diminished, nor splitting them too sharply from another as if they were separate actions of Christ.

JESUS AS PROPHET

In the Old Testament, the prophet revealed God by speaking God’s Word. The prophet was courageously bold and willing to stand up against an entire nation, if needed, to confront sin, command repentance, and cry out the truth of God. The prophet received strong reactions from people who either loved him or hated him. This was because the prophet’s words would bring the repentant to brokenness and the unrepentant to hard-heartedness.
The prototypical and greatest of the Old Testament Prophet was Moses. Moses promised that one day a greater prophet than he was coming as the fulfillment of prophetic ministry.[1] The prophecy of Moses was fulfilled when Jesus the prophet arrived as promised.[2]

The prophet is inextricably connected to the Word of God because the prophet’s ministry was to proclaim God’s Word. According to Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad, the phrase “the word of Yahweh” appears 241 times in the Old Testament. Of those occurrences 221 were on the lips of prophets as their declaration that they were speaking revelation by no less than God’s authority.[3]

Jesus the prophet is superior even to the great prophets of the Old Testament. Unlike the prophets who spoke by God’s authority, because Jesus was God, he spoke by his own authority as the source, center and sum of truth. Consequently rather than appealing to God’s authority, Jesus simply said, “I say to you.”[4]

Those who heard Jesus teach were keenly aware of the fact that he did not speak as any other religious leader but rather spoke by his own authority. His hearers “were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes”[5] Furthermore, Jesus says, “I tell you the truth” at least fifty times in John’s Gospel alone. He is emphatic that he is the truth-telling prophet.

Jesus superiority to the Old Testament prophets extends to his relationship with the Word of God. Scripture reveals that Jesus did not only proclaim the written Word of God, but was the incarnate living Word of God. John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”[6] The written Word of God, or Scripture, exists to reveal the incarnate Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Prophet, Jesus came to preach and is the greatest preacher who ever has or ever will preach. Jesus said that one of the reasons he came to earth was to preach. “And Simon and those who were with him searched for Jesus, and they found him and said to him, ‘Everyone is looking for you.’ And he said to them, ‘Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.’ And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching.”[7]
As a prophet, Jesus is to be understood as the truth-telling, boldly confrontational preacher who attacks our sin, folly, and rebellion by rebuking us and commanding us to repent.

Dr. Grudem points out that Jesus is the One about whom the prophecies in the Old Testament were made (Systematic Theology, 625). When Jesus spoke with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, he took them through the entire Old Testament, showing how the prophecies pointed to him in Luke 24:27. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to Christ in what they wrote, and the New Testament apostles looked back to Christ and interpreted His life for the benefit of the church.

Jesus was not merely a messenger of revelation from God (like the other prophets), but was himself the source of revelation from God. Jesus did not say, “Thus say the Lord,” but “But I say unto you” (Matthew 5:22). The word of the Lord came to the Old Testament prophets, but Jesus spoke on his own authority as the eternal Word of God (John 1:1) who perfectly revealed the Father to us (John 14:9; Hebrews 1:1-2). In the broader sense of prophet, simply meaning one who reveals God to us and speaks to us the words of God, Christ is truly and fully a prophet. He is the One whom all the Old Testament prophets prefigured in their speech and their actions.

The Prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ is authoritative, and it is wrapped up in His own person in such a way that when we look to Jesus we see, not merely a man, but the God-Man who thereby reveals God to us. In our day Jesus performs this ministry through His Holy Spirit who communicates the person of Christ to our minds and hearts through the Scriptures and thus provides for our salvation and sanctification.

[1] Deut 18:15-18
[7] Mark 1:36-42
Jesus As Priest

In the Old Testament, the priest would humbly stand between God and people as a mediator. He would bring the hopes, dreams, fears and sins of the people before God as their advocate and intercessor. The priest would hear their confession of sin and pray for them. Central to his role was the offering of sacrifices to show that sin was very real and deserved death, while asking God for gracious forgiveness. After this, the priest would speak God’s blessing on them. All of the functions of a priest are fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The book of the Bible that deals most thoroughly with the priestly role of Jesus is Hebrews. Hebrews teaches Jesus is man’s high priest.[1] In humility, although God, Jesus became a human being so as to identify with man. As fully God and fully man, Jesus alone is able to be the mediator between us and God.[2] As priest Jesus offered a sacrifice to pay the penalty for man’s sin. Not only is Jesus a priest who is superior to the Old Testament priests, His sacrifice is also superior to theirs- he gave His own life and shed His own blood for man’s sin.[3]

Hebrews reveals that Jesus’ ministry, as our priest, did not end with his return to heaven. Rather, Jesus is alive and ministers to man as man’s high priest who intercedes for them before God the Father.[4] Jesus’ priestly intercession makes man’s prayer and worship possible. Believers pray to and worship the Father through Jesus our priest by the indwelling power of God the Holy Spirit, who has made man’s bodies the new temples in which He lives on the earth.

In his role as priest, Jesus is different from all other man-made religions and their false portraits of God. Every religion sees God in a harsh, cutting, prophetic way. Jesus is the only God who gets off his throne to humbly serve man and give man grace and mercy. The theme of the humble priestly service of Jesus is a thread woven throughout the New Testament . In Luke 19:10, Jesus says, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” In this wonderful statement, Jesus, the loving and concerned priest, sees man as sinners as utterly lost. Jesus humbly, kindly, graciously, and continually pursues man, out of His great love for man.

An example of Jesus’ priestly work in the life of one person found in Matthew 9:9-13. In that passage one is met with a man named Matthew who
is a crooked thief and tax collector who is despised by everyone. While sitting at his tax booth extorting people one day, none other than Jesus walks by. Rather than confronting Matthew as the prophet, Jesus extends a hand of friendship by inviting himself to Matthew’s house for dinner. Joining them later at the party at Matthew’s house were other fellow sinners like Matthew. When word got out to the religious leaders, they were perplexed as to how Jesus could be with such people. Jesus’ answer was purely priestly: that they were sick and needed mercy.

On another occasion, Jesus spoke of his priestly role in terms of humbling serving His own: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”[5] The most insightful text of Scripture on the importance of the priestly ministry of Jesus is Hebrews 4:15-16, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Because he has been where one is today, Jesus not only preaches to man as a prophet, but also sympathizes with man as their priest. Jesus is sympathetic to our temptations, weakness, suffering, sickness, disappointment, pain, confusion, loneliness, betrayal, brokenness, mourning, and sadness. Jesus did not refrain from entering our sick, fallen and crooked world. Instead He humbly came into this world to feel what man feels and face what man faces while remaining sinless. Jesus can now both sympathize with and deliver man from his sin. As a prophet, Jesus speaks to man boldly. As our priest, Jesus serves us humbly. Because He is also man’s King, His speaking and serving extends to every aspect of man’s lives.

Jesus as King

When the Bible speaks of Jesus as “Lord,” it is saying that Jesus is the King of all Kings who rules over all of creation. In John 18:36-37, Jesus has a discussion with a king and reveals that he is indeed the King who rules over all kings with a kingdom that rules over all of creation. Echoing Jesus, theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper once said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!’[1] Jesus taught that His kingdom includes ruling over both the material and immaterial worlds, that which is visible and physical and that which is invisible and spiritual.[2] There is not one part of life of man that does not belong to Jesus or exist under His sovereign rule.

God was reluctant to give Israel a king like the Gentile nations because the Lord God was their king. When God finally allowed Israel to have a king, the earthly sovereign was made responsible to represent him. The king was the leader of the nation and filled the third “anointed” office. In this manner, Christ so fills the anointed office of King. In application of this doctrine, Christians were persecuted in the first century when they taught the kingship of Christ (Acts 7:7). They recognized that Jesus alone must be the single supreme Ruler in their life. This was offensive to Rome, who believed their Caesar was both god and king.

The kingship of Christ is seen in His deity. Because he is God, he is also King. Paul gave praise “Unto the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever” (1 Tim. 1:17). In heaven “And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, ”Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!” (Revelation 15:3). The Romans considered their Caesar to be a god. Christians on the other hand, recognized Jesus alone to be their king. The idea of calling Jesus “King” implied a claim to His deity.

Every king has a domain over which he rules. Jesus is no exception. Jesus said, “My King is not of this world” (John 18:36), but He never denied He had a kingdom. It was the custom of the Romans to identify the crime of a condemned man on the cross upon which he died. Jesus was executed as “The King of the Jews” (John 19:19). When He returns to this earth, He will
do so to establish His Kingdom. Revelation 20 describes His future kingdom as a thousand year reign of peace on the earth.

Christ is now a ruler to those who submit their lives to Him. Someday, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:10-11. Today, those who receive Christ as Lord and Savior recognize the kingship of Christ in their life. Jesus told a parable equating the Christian with a servant. Luke 17:10, “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” One of the unique differences between the Christians of the New Testament and those of today is their attitude toward their relation with Christ. They saw Him as a supreme ruler and themselves a slave in comparison.

After his resurrection, God raised him up and “made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all ruler and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and made him the head over all things for the church” (Eph. 1:20-22; Matt. 28:18; 1 Cor. 15:25). That authority over the church and over the universe will be more fully recognized by people when Jesus returns to earth in power and greater glory to reign (Matt. 26:64; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; Rev. 19:11-16). On that day he will be acknowledge as “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16) and every knee shall bow to him (Phil 2:10).

Christ is the King of a spiritual, eternal realm, ruling over it by means of the Holy Spirit. As such, He gives commands that He expects to be obeyed. The first command that He issues to all men and women is to heed God the Father’s call to put our faith in Him. The first command of the gospel, the preaching about Jesus, which alone discloses the meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures is this: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

All who exercise this obedience of faith as Paul calls it in Romans 16:26 are subjects of Christ and full citizens of His kingdom. Christ is then “our eternal King who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the enjoyment of that salvation, He has purchased for us” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 31). As such we can agree with Calvin when he says:
We may patiently pass through this life with its misery, cold, contempt, reproaches, and other troubles—content with this one thing: that our King will never leave us destitute, but will provide for 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 received from the Father. Now he arms and equips us with his power, adorns us with his beauty and magnificence, enriches us with his wealth. (Inst., 2.15.4.)

We can only hope to grow in the Christian life only as we live obediently under the rule of Christ. If you are a true son or daughter of the Reformation, Christ in His threefold office as Prophet-Priest-King will mean everything to you. The gospel is a gospel of solus Christus (Christ alone), because, from beginning to end, it has everything to do with who Christ is and what He has accomplished outside of us, for us, and in us.