

8

Theological Roots of the Three-Fold Model: The Three-Fold Office of Christ: A Framework for Many Occasions

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Introduction:

AS NOTED IN OTHER PAPERS PRESENTED as part of this symposium, the theological basis for STW's *Three-Fold Model of Organizational Life* is a theological construct known as the *threefold office of Christ*. Revisiting this theological construct at this moment is timely – likely overdue, as the *Three-Fold Model of Organizational Life* has seen extensive use in the field over the last 10 years, and risks becoming a model that is disconnected like a tree cut off from its roots and therefore no longer nourished (and provoked) by the wisdom of the theological tradition which originally informed and shaped it. This paper begins by observing the emergence of this theological paradigm throughout the evolving history and richly diverse theological traditions of the church, including its adoption in the late 1980s as the theological construct focused upon by STW in its efforts to develop a practical theology of institutions. This is followed by a brief overview of the theological content of the

SESSION IV: THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE THREE-FOLD MODEL

threefold office including some very old questions that might appropriately haunt our contemporary conversations within organizations utilizing STW's Three-Fold Model.

A Scant Historical Overview of the Threefold Office of Christ

We sometimes summarize the lineage of the threefold office of Christ as it relates to our current model of organizational life as something like broken field play in a football game—a surprising and perhaps wobbly downfield pass from 16th century Reform theologian John Calvin into the capable hands of contemporary systematic theologian Gabriel Fackre who, in turn, presses it into the cradled arms of our own rogue theologian Dick Broholm who, seeing just a glimmer of daylight, begins dancing his way toward the goal line. While tidy, this thumbnail sketch risks marginalizing the threefold office of Christ as a worthy anchor for a contemporary theology of institutions by failing to acknowledge its broader theological parentage – a family tree including a surprising range of others in the history of the church who have both utilized and contributed to the development of this important way of understanding and re-presenting the relevance to us of the life and ministry of Jesus.

For instance, the three offices of prophet, priest and king are ascribed to Christ as early as the 4th century by Eusebius,¹ a bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, a prominent figure in the Council of Nicaea, and often referred to as the father of church history because of his work in recording the history of the early Christian church. Some expression of this concept also appears in Jerome, Augustine, Aquinas, and Schleiermacher, and appears in such recent thinkers as Bulgakov, Visser 't Hooft, and Barth.² For the most part, in these earlier years the doctrine of Christ followed the tradition of a twofold office – king and priest – reflected in the works of Luther and the earlier catechisms. Calvin added the prophetic office as the third function, resulting in a threefold conception of Christ's work that became the basis of Reformed theology and soon after Lutheran theology as well. This conception gained wide circulation through the Heidelberg Catechism (Questions 31 and 32)³ and later in Luther's Small Catechism.

While its earlier use focused largely on reinforcing the link between Christ's ministry and the ministry of ordained clergy, Gabe Fackre reminds us that as early as the 4th century, Chrysostom comments on the baptism of the Christian believer: "So also art thyself made king and priest and prophet in the laver."⁴ Calvin was probably the first to use the

SESSION IV: THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE THREE-FOLD MODEL

threefold office to describe the nature and ministry of an institution, the Church,⁵ while the import of the threefold office for the whole people of God is reinforced in the Vatican II's *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* and is used today in Roman Catholic rites of Christian initiation.⁶

It was around the task of developing a more fulsome theological understanding of the connection between Christ's ministry and the day-to-day workplace ministries of the laity, that we first began, under the guidance of Gabe Fackre, to wrestle with the implications of the threefold office of Christ.

Theological Content of the Three Offices

This section offers a brief summary of the primary theological themes associated with each of the three offices of Christ's ministry, *prophet*, *priest* and *king*. All three of these roles functioned in First Testament Israel as distinct and partial ways of mediating the relationship between God and the people of Israel, the relationships of the people of Israel to one another, and the relationships between the people of Israel and other peoples and nations. In an attempt to discover trace the thread that flows from the theological tradition as gathered up by Gabe Fackre to our present three-fold model of organizational life, in each instance I will correlate:

- the original theological meaning of an office with
- its implication for lay ministry and translation into types of ministry associated with each office, and
- the representation of the same into the three dimensions of organizational life found in STW's model.

I will conclude by noting one or more queries posed by the original theological focus of each office.

Prophet

*"to confess his name"*⁷

The tradition: "Prophets *expose* our condition as well as *disclose* God's intention ... And they spoke for God, not by their own authority."⁸

SESSION IV: THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE THREE-FOLD MODEL

“The Old Testament prophet is a seer of the Vision of God ... pointing toward the coming Kingdom, in which the will of God would be done on earth as well as it is in Heaven ... The unmistakable signs of foreseeing and the notes of foretelling and forewarning that identify the prophet are to be found in Jesus’ preaching and teaching about the Kingdom of God ... the work of the Prophet is both the disclosure of the ultimate reaches of the Vision and also the *exposure* of the depths of resistance to it by the powers of sin and evil.”⁹

Prophetic Office and the Ministry of the Laity: “The prophetic office of the ministry of the laity ... is the command to bear witness to what has been seen and heard ... But the naming that is fitting in this secular arena is not the uncritical transfer to the secular setting of the code language of the ecclesial community. As Christ comes to this arena, hidden in the concerns that swarm through the world, so [the laity] are beckoned to keep company with him there and to speak for him ... in terms of these living issues and in the midst of involvement with them ... The prophetic office, as embodied by its antecedents, is one of seeing visions as well as speaking words ... The collision between God’s ultimate future and the world’s self-serving agendas for tomorrow results in pain for the visionary in the church scattered ... There is no escape from the world’s hostility for those God calls to exercise prophetic ministry.”¹⁰

Three Expressions of Prophetic Ministry: In the early 1980s, Dick Broholm and colleagues in conversation with Gabe Fackre, built upon Fackre’s treatment of the three-fold office of Christ by proposing specific types of ministry that are expressions of each of the three offices.¹¹ The three types of ministry identified as expressions of the prophetic office are *teaching*, *critiquing*, and *envisioning*.

Teaching Providing information, ideas, skills, or ways of viewing reality in ways that empower others through reducing their dependence and fostering competence and potency.

Critiquing Rooted in the conviction that the existing way of perceiving reality or way of doing things is wrong, critiquing is challenging the prevailing assumptions about what is “true” or “possible”.

Envisioning Every challenge to the existing order assumes an alternative vision of a preferred future. A key element of envisioning is the capacity to provide a clear and

SESSION IV: THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE THREE-FOLD MODEL

compelling description of an alternative that has the ability to free us from our fears and invite us into a more promising future.

The Prophetic Office and the Dimension of Purpose: In the 1990s, when Broholm and Specht resumed work on the development of a theology of institutions, they also resumed their conversation with the threefold office of Christ and theologian Gabe Fackre to explore its organizational expression. In STW's *Three-Fold Model of Organizational Life* the expression of the prophetic office was articulated as the organizational dimension of purpose. The organization's dimension of purpose is an expression of "its commitment to serve the well-being of others, and its conviction that there is a fundamental purpose – a vocation to which it is called and accountable."¹² Strategically, this dimension finds expression in at least three fundamental ways:

Teaching Sharing information and providing knowledge, which illumines and empowers.

Critiquing Being accountable through ongoing evaluation of performance to ensure excellence in service to the public.

Envisioning Developing a vision of serving the common good which taps into the life energy of the organization.¹³

Provocative Queries related to the Prophetic Office

As noted in the beginning of this paper, as we continue to accumulate a body of experience of using STW's *Three-Fold Model* in organizations, we risk overtime losing the rich connection of this model to its theological roots and falling asleep to provocative questions that each of these offices might pose to us today. While the effort to articulate these questions is, I believe, appropriately a communal task, it is fun to imagine where such an effort might lead us. Queries emerging from the prophetic office of Christ might include:

- What are the sources of authority against which we test the faithfulness of our visions for the future?
- Are the visions we hold for our organizations large enough for our souls, or do they suffer from being too tame and accepting of the way things are?

SESSION IV: THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE THREE-FOLD MODEL

- What is the relationship of the dreams and plans we have for our organizations to God's dream of Shalom?
- In the midst of our commitment to compassionate solidarity with those who work in complex and ambiguous world of organizations, have we become less capable of recognizing and articulating the difference between right and wrong?

Priest

“to present myself a living sacrifice of thanksgiving to him”¹⁴

The tradition: “While the prophet casts up on the screen of the future the Purpose of God and calls people toward it, the priest deals with the gap between the Vision and the reality of where the people are in their listless and rebellious journey toward the future ... the central act of the priest is to deal with the fact of sin—to make a sacrifice for the offense of the people against the Purpose of God.¹⁵ ... Jesus Christ is suffering Priest. He offers himself as victim of the world's knife thrust through the heart of Shalom. In the shed blood he is the God who suffers in our place, and the human who chooses that agony as the agent of our reconciliation with God and our liberation from sin and guilt.¹⁶

The Priestly Office and the Ministry of the Laity: “The Letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus as high priest who understands the human condition in its weakness and vulnerability, from within the human condition, and who makes sacrifice and supplication to God for us ... Long ago the clerical monopoly of this office was challenged by the Reformers. The priestly order is in fact the whole baptized people of God ... Priestly ministers care for the identity in the institutions in and for which they take responsibility ... Are there peak (or valley) internal experiences in secular institutions that might be liturgically acknowledged and enabled by the ministers of vitality? The priestly office continues the witness of solidarity and vulnerability.”¹⁷

Three Expressions of Priestly Ministry: Three types of ministry identified as expressions of the priestly office are *modeling*, *caring*, and *celebrating*.¹⁸

Modeling Modeling includes both the refusal to act in certain ways (e.g. taking bribes, bearing false witness against one another, demeaning through a word or

SESSION IV: THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE THREE-FOLD MODEL

glance), and the decision to adopt alternative traits or behaviors ... Living out or embodying (the Church has called this incarnation) this new alternative ... makes it seem genuinely possible.

Caring How we care for the needy or oppressed ... losing our lives in service to others ... the contractor who builds homes, the lab technician who tests for cancer, the postal worker who bridges the gap between distant friends are all involved in a caring ministry, even though it is unlikely that they will ever intimately know the people they are serving ... If caring is to be genuinely helpful, there must be an attempt to understand and act upon the conditions that lead to oppression.

Celebrating Recognizing and calling attention to the truth of God's presence, and the in-breaking of God's kingdom in our everyday affairs ... acknowledging what *is* ... the occasion for both confession and praise.

The Priestly Office and the Dimension of Identity: In STW's *Three-Fold Model of Organizational Life* the expression of the priestly office was articulated as the organizational dimension of identity. The organization's dimension of identity is an expression of the conviction that organizations, like persons "are uniquely gifted, called to exercise those gifts in the service of others, and accountable for how well they serve the greater good."¹⁹ Strategically, this dimension finds expression in at least three fundamental ways:

Celebrating Acknowledging the truth of the situation so as to affirm the challenge.

Hosting Providing an environment, which nurtures, heals, encourages and empowers risk taking.

Modeling Embodying the core values and vision in policies and practice.²⁰

Provocative Queries related to the Priestly Office

Queries emerging from the priestly office of Christ might include:

- What might it mean to fully inhabit the painful tension between the way things really are and the way they ought to be?
- What are the implications of "self-sacrifice that atones for the sins of others" for today's organizations?
- How might we in our organizations ritually acknowledge our significant experiences of birth and death, faithfulness and failure, fear and resolve?

Royal (King)

“to fight against sin and the Devil”²¹

The tradition: “When kings were kings, they made things happen. Thus the victory and power of Christ are described in the classical regal idiom ... Jesus Christ makes things happen. He defeated the forces of sin, evil, and death on Easter morning and now empowers his purpose in the world, assuring its ultimate victory.²² ... Sin and guilt meet their match in the priestly Work of Christ. But the powers of evil remain to be finally dealt with. The engagement with evil extends into the arena of political, social, and economic power structures that [Jesus] meets at each turn of his ministry, from the Sanhedrin to imperial Rome. As the conquest of sin is the reconciliation of humanity with God, so the victory over evil and death is the reconciliation of nature and history with God, within themselves, and with each other.”²³ While the potency of kings has passed and the masculine image does not do justice to the inclusive rule of Christ, regency does strike the note of *leadership*. Indeed, a different kind of leadership, for here the symbol is broken and remade: Christ reigns from the cross. The victory over the powers and principalities was won through suffering love and continues through vulnerability. The leadership is the power of powerlessness, the potency of servanthood.”²⁴

The Royal Office and the Ministry of the Laity: “The royal office is an unambiguous statement of the imperatives of leadership ... as resource and enabler rather than source or Oriental sovereign. Anxiety about the claims of the ministry of the laity, among laity themselves, is not infrequently related to the burdens of this royal office ... for it demands leadership in the secular context.”²⁵

Three Expressions of Royal Ministry: Three types of ministry identified as expressions of the royal office are *making and distributing*, *managing*, and *building*.²⁶

Making and Distributing What we produce and what we use in its production is a basic statement about who or what we worship. Ministry is performed in how and what we manufacture, but also in how these goods are distributed. If the way we go

SESSION IV: THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE THREE-FOLD MODEL

about distributing means that much is wasted while many go without, then the ministry of distributing is sinfully performed and/or structured.

Managing Those called to a ministry of management are called to steward the gifts of God's creation. This involves managing processes of production as well as stewarding the gifts and talents of people.

Building This type of ministry has to do with both the building of physical and organizational structures as these relate to the building of community.

The Royal Office and the Dimension of Stewardship: In STW's *Three-Fold Model of Organizational Life* the expression of the priestly office is articulated as the organizational dimension of stewardship. The organization's dimension of stewardship is an expression of the recognition of "the sacred trust the organization holds in fulfilling its responsibility for governing its gathered life, and the similarly sacred trust involved in using well the many resources that fall within its field of influence."²⁷ Strategically, this dimension finds expression in at least three fundamental ways:

Governing Ensuring that all processes balance contending interests, enhance teamwork and build accountability among all stakeholders.

Managing Utilizing human, material and financial resources so as to fulfill its mission and steward those resources as a sustainable trust.

Building Creating structures and systems, which empower and sustain the capacity to serve.²⁸

Provocative Queries related to the Royal Office

Queries emerging from the royal office of Christ might include:

- How in our organizations are our understandings of the purpose and use of power informed by an ethic of service?
- How is the exercise of prerogative and power in our organizations linked to our understanding of and commitment to the common good?
- How might our exercise of power and prerogative in our organization reflect an awareness of the reality of "sin and death" and a commitment to struggle against their momentums?

Three in One

In addition to this modest effort to recall the essential theological themes associated with the threefold office of Christ it is also important, I believe, to reflect at least briefly on the relationship *among* these three offices. This is important as it relates to an assertion in STW's *Three-Fold Model of Organizational Life* that the three dimensions of Identity, Purpose and Stewardship all exist within every organizations, each with its legitimate preoccupations and interests that are normatively in some level of dynamic tension with the interests and preoccupations of the other two dimensions.

Historically, the threefold office of Christ supplanted an earlier twofold understanding of Christ's person and work and priest and king. The addition of the prophetic office was an attempt to recognize the essential role of Christ as prophetic witness to God's purposes in the midst of history, in ways that called into account both the political order and the priestly caste of his own religious tradition. Writing as a reformer, Calvin appears to have employed the prophetic office as an assertion of Christ's fulfillment and consummation of all revelation and, consequently, as a caution against the development of heretical doctrine.²⁹ It is no surprise that the emerging theological consensus affirming the threefold character of Christ's person and work was followed by disagreements about which of these three offices ought to be understood as primary. The tendency to emphasize different offices continues to this day with liberal Protestants stressing the prophetic; evangelicals and the Catholic tradition emphasizing the priestly; and Eastern Orthodox and liberation theology focusing on the royal-liberator roles of Christ.³⁰

The structure of the threefold office, however, invites a holistic understanding of the life and ministry of Christ that can be achieved only by regarding each of the three dimensions as it exists in relationship to the other two. Jesus was Seer (prophet) and Sufferer (priest) and Libera-tor/Conqueror (resurrected King) overcoming the power of death.³¹

SESSION IV : THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE THREE-FOLD MODEL

¹ Miller, E. F. Karl. "Jesus Christ, Threefold Office Of." *Christian Classic Ethereal Library at Calvin College* October 2003. <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc06/htm/iii.lvii.v.htm>.

² Fackre, Gabriel. *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine, Volume 1, 3rd Edition.* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996). p.134.

³ *The Heidelberg Catechism.* (Philadelphia: Board of Christian Education of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1902). p. 145. The catechism is also available on the web, including at: <http://www.reformed.org/documents/heidelberg.html>.

⁴ Fackre, Gabriel. "Christ's Ministry and Ours." *The Laity in Ministry: The Whole People of God for the Whole World.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984). p. 117.

⁵ Broholm, Richard and colleagues. *Thinkpiece #2: Assumptions Behind Our Work on a Theology of Institutions.* (Shelburne Falls, MA: The Center for Seeing Things Whole, 1994). p. 10.

⁶ "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity," *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 491.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Fackre, Dorothy and Gabriel. *Christian Basic: A Primer for Pilgrims.* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991). pp. 54, 57.

⁹ Fackre, Gabriel. *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine, Volume 1, 3rd Edition.* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996). pp.135-137.

¹⁰ Fackre, Gabriel. "Christ's Ministry and Ours." *The Laity in Ministry: The Whole People of God for the Whole World.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984). p. 118-120.

¹¹ Broholm, Richard et al. *Toward Claiming and Identifying Our Ministry in the Workplace.* (Newton Centre, MA: The Center for the Ministry of the Laity, 1984) This publication is out of print.

¹² David Specht and Dick Broholm, *Three-fold Model of Organizational Life: Testimonies and Queries for Seeing Things Whole.* (Shelburne Falls, MA: Seeing Things Whole, 2005). p. 3.

¹³ David Specht and Dick Broholm, *Three-fold Model of Organizational Life: Testimonies and Queries for Seeing Things Whole.* (Shelburne Falls, MA: Seeing Things Whole, 2005). p. 5.

¹⁴ "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity," *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 491.

¹⁵ Fackre, Gabriel. *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine, Volume 1, 3rd Edition.* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996). pp.138-139.

¹⁶ Fackre, Gabriel. *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine, Volume 1, 3rd Edition.* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996). p.144.

¹⁷ Fackre, Gabriel. "Christ's Ministry and Ours." *The Laity in Ministry: The Whole People of God for the Whole World.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984). p. 120-122.

¹⁸ Broholm, Richard et al. *Toward Claiming and Identifying Our Ministry in the Workplace.* (Newton Centre, MA: The Center for the Ministry of the Laity, 1984) This publication is out of print.

¹⁹ David Specht and Dick Broholm, *Three-fold Model of Organizational Life: Testimonies and Queries for Seeing Things Whole.* (Shelburne Falls, MA: Seeing Things Whole, 2005). p. 2.

²⁰ David Specht and Dick Broholm, *Three-fold Model of Organizational Life: Testimonies and Queries for Seeing Things Whole.* (Shelburne Falls, MA: Seeing Things Whole, 2005). p. 5.

²¹ "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity," *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 491.

²² Fackre, Gabriel. "Christ's Ministry and Ours." *The Laity in Ministry: The Whole People of God for the Whole World.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984). p. 122.

²³ Fackre, Gabriel. *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine, Volume 1, 3rd Edition.* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996). pp.144-147.

²⁴ Fackre, Gabriel. "Christ's Ministry and Ours." *The Laity in Ministry: The Whole People of God for the Whole World.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984). p. 122.

²⁵ Fackre, Gabriel. "Christ's Ministry and Ours." *The Laity in Ministry: The Whole People of God for the Whole World.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984). pp. 122-123.

²⁶ Broholm, Richard et al. *Toward Claiming and Identifying Our Ministry in the Workplace.* (Newton Centre, MA: The Center for the Ministry of the Laity, 1984) This publication is out of print.

²⁷ David Specht and Dick Broholm, *Three-fold Model of Organizational Life: Testimonies and Queries for Seeing Things Whole.* (Shelburne Falls, MA: Seeing Things Whole, 2005). p. 4.

²⁸ David Specht and Dick Broholm, *Three-fold Model of Organizational Life: Testimonies and Queries for Seeing Things Whole.* (Shelburne Falls, MA: Seeing Things Whole, 2005). p. 5.

²⁹ Miller, E. F. Karl. "Jesus Christ, Threefold Office Of." *Christian Classic Ethereal Library at Calvin College* October 2003. <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc06/htm/iii.lvii.v.htm>.

SESSION IV: THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE THREE-FOLD MODEL

³⁰ Unpublished interview with theologian Gabriel Fackre, 1995.

³¹ Fackre, Gabriel. *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine, Volume 1, 3rd Edition*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996). pp.149-151.