

The Servant Lord: A Word of Caution Regarding the *munus triplex* in Karl Barth's Theology and the Church Today

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Abstract

Contemporary theology exhibits a lively interest in using the traditional doctrine of the *munus triplex* (the threefold mediatorial office of Christ as prophet, priest and king) to unify our understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ and ground it in the Old Testament witness. This article explores Karl Barth's contribution to this trend and draws from it a set of reflections for the church today. Scholarly consensus suggests that Barth offers an exceptionally robust development of the *munus triplex* in shaping the formal structure and material content of his doctrine of reconciliation. In this article I contend that his use of this concept is actually quite superficial in nature. As scholars are wont to point out, Barth incorporates the *munus triplex* into eye-catching summary statements throughout *CD IV* – but these statements are more ambiguous than they might at first seem. A closer examination of the details of his account of the work of Christ, and particularly his hamartiology, demonstrates that the *munus triplex* does not substantially inform his treatment of these subjects, and that his own unique christological concerns provide the determining influence. While Barth was eager to align his position with that of Reformed orthodoxy, focusing on the *munus triplex* ultimately distracts the reader from his primary concerns. Much the same is true for the church today – when used as a sufficient interpretative device for offering an account of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the *munus triplex* suffers the fate of many an artificial schema for biblical interpretation, distracting us from the breadth and depth of the biblical witness by offering an overly tidy, artificially organised account of the material. Nevertheless, when modestly employed, it remains a significant though limited conceptual device for understanding Christ's person and work, which the church should employ in several ways so as to integrate the Old and New Testaments in its proclamation of the Gospel.

Keywords: Atonement, Karl Barth, mediator, *munus triplex*, Old Testament, office, prophet, priest and king, reconciliation.

The doctrine of the *munus triplex* (Christ's threefold mediatorial office as prophet, priest and king¹) is a traditional schema for understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ, according to which 'Christ fulfilled in his work all the anointed offices of the old covenant'.² Found in many popular and academic works today, the doctrine remains a significant conceptual tool by which to account for the unity of the work of Christ. One form of the current interest in this conceptual scheme revolves around the way that the unified diversity inherent in the tripartite office of Christ suggests a tripartite work of Christ. It thus unifies what are often thought to be the three main aspects of Christ's atoning work: his substitutionary sacrifice, his defeat of Satan and the example he provides us.³ For example, Robert Sherman argues that 'theology should recognize a certain correspondence and mutual support between the three persons of the Trinity, the threefold office of Christ, and the three commonly recognized models of his atoning work', offering what is to date one of the more detailed biblical accounts of the relationship between the *munus triplex* and the doctrine of the atonement.⁴ While not all follow his thesis concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, many are sympathetic when it comes to using this scheme to unify their account

¹ For a brief note on the traditional arrangements of these three offices and Barth's unique position, cf. Karl Barth, *Karl Barth's Table Talk*, ed. John Drew Godsey (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963), pp. 17–18. There is some question concerning whether there is one threefold office or three offices. The roots of this ambiguity go back to Calvin himself, who spoke variously of the one office of mediator, and the three offices. Cf. *Institutes*, II.xii, p. 464; II.xv.2, p. 495. While ultimately the *munus triplex* understands Christ to have one threefold office, it is necessary at times to speak of his distinct offices.

² Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 197. For the history of this doctrine, see CD IV/3.1, 5–6, 13; John Frederick Jansen, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Work of Christ* (London: J. Clark, 1956), pp. 13–38; Gerald W. McCulloh, *Christ's Person and Life-Work in the Theology of Albrecht Ritschl: With Special Attention to Munus Triplex* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), pp. 86–145; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, tr. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (London: SCM, 1968), pp. 212–25. The three 'offices' are rooted in Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the 'anointed one'. That kings (1 Sam 10:1; 16:1–13; 1 Kings 1:39; 2 Kings 9:1–6) and priests (Ex 29:7, 21; Lev 8:2–12; 21:10–12) were anointed is clear in the Old Testament. The lone reference to the anointing of a prophet occurs in 1 Kgs 19:16, making for an exegetically weak connection between the name 'anointed one' and the prophetic office, though it was traditional to read Ps 45 and Is 61:1 as supporting this thesis.

³ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, tr. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1951); Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁴ Robert Sherman, *King, Priest and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of Atonement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 9.

of Christ's atoning work, for the unified diversity proper to the threefold office would seem to bear promising fruit for integrating the diverse aspects of Christ's work.⁵

While there is much to appreciate in this line of thought, particularly the way that it draws on the Old Testament for its understanding of the work of Christ,⁶ it is also prone to significant weaknesses. One should heed Karl Barth's warning that 'the particular danger of dogmatics is to think schematically' (CD IV/2, p. 7), for this is precisely the great temptation attending the use of the *munus triplex* schema: to take a helpful conceptual device and use it as a comprehensive or sufficient account of the unity of Christ's work. Consequently, the schema takes on a life of its own, threatening to divorce itself from the resources and constraints offered by the biblical witness and to operate with an increasingly ambiguous understanding of the key concepts involved.

In order to bring the church's attention to this delicate relationship between a helpful schema and dangerous schematic thinking with regard to the *munus triplex*, I will delve into Barth's use of it. This line of inquiry is helpful for two reasons. On the one hand, most scholars contend that Barth uses the *munus triplex* to significantly shape the formal structure and material content of his doctrine of reconciliation – so we have in him a theologian deeply sympathetic towards the strengths of this schema. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that Barth is wary of schematic thinking. He thus manifests the two primary concerns motivating this inquiry. We will find that Barth's use of the *munus triplex* is considerably more modest than his interpreters recognise – a point which I will draw upon for a constructive proposal regarding the church's use of the *munus triplex* as a significant but insufficient conceptual device for understanding Christ's atoning work.

Current views of the *munus triplex* in Barth's thought

Eberhard Jüngel's now famous chart of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation notes the role of the *munus triplex* within that volume. Each part-volume covers christology, hamartiology, soteriology and pneumatology, resulting

⁵ Cf. T. F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), pp. 56–60; Leanne Van Dyk, 'The Three Offices of Christ: The *Munus Triplex* as Expansive Resources in Atonement', *Catalyst* 25/ 2 (1999); Geoffrey Wainwright, *For our Salvation: Two Approaches to the Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 99–186; David T. Williams, 'Towards a Unified Theory of the Atonement', in Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker (eds), *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

⁶ Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, p. 224.

in a threefold account of each doctrinal locus, with the former, christology, including an account of Christ's threefold office: priest (CD IV/1), king (CD IV/2) and prophet (CD IV/3).⁷ The chart is ambiguous, however, as to whether the *munus triplex* (1) is one of several discrete topics or (2) has a formative role to play in the shaping of the whole. Jüngel himself has no doubt on this matter: 'Barth broadly deploys his Christology [including the *munus triplex*] as the basis of his treatment of sin, justification, sanctification . . . vocation [and] the work of the Holy Spirit'.⁸ Along these lines, Eberhard Busch writes that 'the arrangement of the doctrine of reconciliation . . . followed Calvin's doctrine of the *munus triplex* . . . Each of these three aspects was considered in turn, first in terms of Christology, then of soteriology [including hamartiology] and finally of pneumatology'.⁹ In short, the *munus triplex* seems to be at the heart of Barth's christology, playing an important structural and material role within the whole by ordering and shaping his soteriology.¹⁰

Phil Butin strengthens this interpretation, drawing on several of Barth's works to demonstrate his consistent appreciation of and reliance upon the *munus triplex*. He argues that the Geneva and Heidelberg Catechisms and 'their

⁷ Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, tr. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), pp. 48–9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, tr. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 377.

¹⁰ This is the majority view by Barth scholars. Others who mention this role of the *munus triplex* in Barth's thought include: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, tr. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), pp. 391–2; Colin E. Gunton, *The Barth Lectures*, ed. Paul Brazier (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 201; George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 141–2, n. 18; Paul Dafydd Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), pp. 122–6; Bruce L. McCormack, 'Karl Barth's Historicized Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" is it?', in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 202; Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry Into Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2009), pp. 74–5. Of the major Barth scholars, Geoffrey Bromiley de-emphasises the *munus triplex*, as evidenced in his series of reviews of CD IV/1–3 in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*. Bromiley attends instead to the 'foundation of the threefold confession of Jesus Christ as very God, very Man and the God-man'. Geoffrey William Bromiley, 'Doctrine of the Atonement: A Survey of Barth's Kirchliche Dogmatik IV.1', *SJT* 8 (1955). The same is true of his work: Geoffrey William Bromiley, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979). John Webster does much the same in his survey of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation, focusing on Barth's use of Chalcedonian categories. John Webster, *Barth* (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 114–17.

use of the *munus triplex* . . . had a profound impact on the shape of the Church Dogmatics, volume IV', providing it with a 'comprehensive Christological paradigm', or its 'basic, if subterranean structure'.¹¹ Georg Pfeleiderer takes the role of the *munus triplex* a step further, suggesting that Barth 'finds a systematic explanation for [this] threefold typology . . . [which] is provided by the doctrine of the Trinity', such that 'the soteriological aspect of Christ as a priest is (dialectically) related to the work of the Father . . . ; the image of Christ as a king is related to the work of the Son . . . ; the metaphor of Christ as the prophet is connected with the work of the Holy Spirit'.¹² And with this claim we have come full circle back to Robert Sherman's point tying together the Trinity, *munus triplex* and the three main aspects of Christ's atoning work.

To be sure, Barth uses the *munus triplex* throughout his work. In his explanation of the three forms of the doctrine of reconciliation early in CD IV/1, he states that 'we shall still follow the traditional path to the extent that in content and meaning this division corresponds exactly to what earlier dogmatics worked out as the doctrine of the high-priestly and kingly office of Christ', incorporating Christ's prophetic office a few pages later (CD IV/1, pp. 135–7).¹³ He further establishes this point while summarising his hamartiology (CD IV/1, pp. 143–4), confirming thereby Jüngel and Busch's view of the formative role of the *munus triplex*. In short, there seems to be every reason to think that CD IV/1–3 is an unprecedented development of the *munus triplex*, mining it for its full material and formal dogmatic potential, unifying Barth's account of the doctrine of reconciliation.

That Barth made consistent use of the *munus triplex* throughout his theological career is indubitable.¹⁴ My concern is with the precise nature

¹¹ Phil Butin, 'Two Early Reformed Catechisms, the Threefold Office, and the Shape of Karl Barth's Christology', *SJT* 44/1 (1991), pp. 195–6, 200. Similarly, Bruce McCormack notes that Barth 'uses the "threefold office" of Christ to order the material which would classically have been treated under the headings of "divine nature," "human nature," and the "unity" of the two, respectively'. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, p. 202.

¹² Georg Pfeleiderer, 'The Atonement', in Paul Louis Metzger (ed.), *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 129–30.

¹³ On the role of the prophetic office in Barth's theology, see Karin Bornkamm, *Christus: König und Priester. Das Amt Christi bei Luther im Verhältnis zur Vor- und Nachgeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), pp. 382–5; Karin Bornkamm, 'Die reformatorische Lehre vom Amt Christi und ihre Umformung durch Karl Barth', in Karin Bornkamm and Eberhard Jüngel (eds), *Zur Theologie Karl Barths* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986).

¹⁴ Cf. Karl Barth, *Credo: A Presentation of the Chief Problems of Dogmatics with Reference to the Apostles' Creed* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), pp. 41–7, 110–12; Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, tr. G. T. Thompson (New York: Harper, 1959), pp. 74, 77–8; Karl Barth, *The*

of the relationship between the *munus triplex* and the shape of Barth's thought. As I have shown, the majority view among scholars is that the relationship is a deeply formative one. In the next section I challenge the paradigm that the *munus triplex* decisively shapes Barth's doctrine of reconciliation, paying particular attention to his Christocentric hamartiology. My thesis is that Barth's constructive use of this traditional schema is quite limited, serving as a traditional gloss to his own christological framework ('Lord as Servant', 'Servant as Lord', and 'the Servant Lord').¹⁵ While Barth is eager to show that in retrospect his constructive project aligns with the traditional view, he does not rely upon the *munus triplex* for the material or formal content of his doctrine of reconciliation in the *Church Dogmatics*.

The *munus triplex* in Barth's doctrine of reconciliation

Barth clearly has the threefold office of Christ in mind throughout his doctrine of reconciliation, as evidenced in extended and occasional references to the subject.¹⁶ But just how formative is its role? To answer this question, we will examine Barth's Christocentric hamartiology.¹⁷ Given that Barth's hamartiology finds its dogmatic location strictly within christology, if the *munus triplex* does not play a formative role in his hamartiology, either it is not significant for his doctrine of reconciliation, or Barth was blatantly inconsistent. The tension between Barth's explicit claims regarding the role of the *munus triplex* in his hamartiology, and the actual course his argument takes, will provide us with a firm foundation for answering our question.

Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostle's Creed According to Calvin's Catechism, tr. Gabriel A. Vahanian (New York: Meridian, 1958), pp. 58, 65–9; Karl Barth, *Table Talk*, pp. 17, 34; Karl Barth, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, ed. Heinrich Stoevesandt (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1925–6), pp. 74–197. In his second commentary on Romans, Barth was opposed to the use of the *munus triplex*, on the grounds that it 'obscures and weakens the New Testament concentration upon the death of Christ'. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, tr. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: OUP, 1968), p. 159. This may have to do with Barth thinking of the *munus triplex* in light of the work of Albrecht Ritschl, which he cites in this context – a point confirmed, I think, in Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*, tr. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 647.

¹⁵ An exposition of Barth's christological framework is beyond the scope of this article, which pursues the more modest question of the role of the *munus triplex* within Barth's doctrine of reconciliation.

¹⁶ These casual references (cf. CD III/2, p. 342) are quite significant, for they show how often this schema was on Barth's mind.

¹⁷ On Barth's Christocentric hamartiology, cf. Allen Jorgenson, 'Karl Barth's Christological Treatment of Sin', *SJT* 54/4 (2001); Wolf Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth*, tr. Philip G. Ziegler and Christina-Maria Bammel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005).

We will then briefly consider Barth's doctrine of the atonement in the 'Judge Judged in Our Place'.

Barth gives every reason to think that he builds his hamartiology upon the foundation of the *munus triplex*. Recapitulating his argument, he writes: 'in the first part ("The Lord as Servant" [CD IV/1]) we saw [sin] reflected in the high-priestly work of Jesus Christ. It appeared as the strange opposite of the humility with which the Son of God humbled Himself in obedience to the Father' – as pride. 'In the second part [CD IV/2] . . . it was set in light of His kingly work. It thus appeared as the strange opposite of the exaltation and majesty of the Son of Man' – as sloth. Now, 'in the encounter with the prophetic work of Jesus Christ [CD IV/3.1], as a negative reflection of the self-revelation and glory of the Mediator . . . his sin appears in guise of falsehood' (CD IV/3.1, pp. 368–9). In short,

Barth coordinates these counter-movements [of sin] with God's movement toward us in Christ under the rubric of Christ's threefold office (*munus triplex*). To each aspect of the office there is a perverse parody. The humble priest is mocked by his proud counterpart. The exalted king is contrasted with the man of sloth. The true witness ('prophet') is opposed by a liar.¹⁸

Matt Jenson's summary is entirely in line with Barth's explicit statement – it seems clear that the *munus triplex* undergirds the formal and material content of Barth's hamartiology. But it is precisely in this summary that significant difficulties emerge. For instance: what connection does the priesthood have with pride that in any way sets it apart from the other offices? Is sloth the besetting sin of kings? And is the prophetic office any more closely related to the sin of falsehood than that of disobedience? In short, is the threefold office of Christ really motivating Barth's hamartiology?

The biblical warrant for the connection between Barth's hamartiology and the *munus triplex* is weak at best. Moses' great sin was not trusting in the Lord (Num 20:12), the prophet's disobedience in 1 Kings 13 causes his downfall, and Jonah sought to flee from God's presence (Jonah 1:3). Falsehood is not at issue here. With regard to kings, Saul lost his kingdom through disobedience (1 Sam 15:22–3), David's greatest sin was utterly scorning the Lord and despising his word (2 Sam 12:9, 14), Solomon disobeyed the Lord by marrying foreign women, who then turned his heart from the Lord (1 Kgs 11:1–4), and in the books of Kings, the question is whether or not the kings walk in the way of the Lord. Does sloth emerge from the biblical

¹⁸ Matt Jenson, *Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther and Barth on 'Homo Incurvatus in Se'* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 156–7.

account of the kings? The demise of Nadab and Abihu resulted from offering incense to God in a way other than that commanded (Lev 10:1), the Lord poured his anger on Israel for the blood of the righteous shed by the priests (Lam 4:12–13), and Malachi accused the priests of despising the name of the Lord, cheating him with their sacrifices, not guarding knowledge, and not instructing the people (Mal 1:6–7, 2:6–7). While we could integrate pride into this account of the sins of the priests, this is not demanded by the text. There is no obvious connection between the Old Testament's account of the priests, kings and prophets and Barth's hamartiology.

Compounding this difficulty, the passages from which Barth draws do not tend to correspond with the offices in question. In his treatment of pride Barth examines Israel's sin at Mount Sinai, followed by the sin of Saul, Ahab and finally Jeremiah (CD IV/1, pp. 423–32, 437–45, 453–8, 468–78). Ironically, Barth thus covers every office except that of priest. While there is some emphasis on King David in his exposition of sloth, we still see signs of ambivalence with regard to the *munus triplex* in Barth's development of the sin of Nabal, Amos, David and Bathsheba, and the spies sent by Moses to investigate the Promised Land (CD IV/2, pp. 424–32, 445–52, 464–7, 478–83). This is all the more the case in CD IV/3, which offers a fourfold exposition of the book of Job (CD IV/3.1, pp. 382–8, 398–408, 421–34, 453–61) without reference to the prophets.¹⁹ In short, neither the biblical account of the priests, kings and prophets nor the exegetical material developed by Barth suggests that the *munus triplex* plays a significant role in his account of sin as pride, sloth and falsehood.

It may be helpful to examine the sin of pride, which Barth characterises as the desire to be one's own lord and judge (CD IV/1, pp. 432, 449). While there is no unique connection between the priestly office and this understanding of pride, it is obvious how pride fits within Barth's christological framework of the Lord who becomes servant. Barth writes: 'we recall our main Christological definition that the Lord became a servant. His rule consists in the fact that He became a subject . . . But the man for whom God is God in this way in Jesus Christ is the very opposite – the servant who wants to be Lord' (CD IV/1, p. 432). Pride is the desire of the servant to be lord, in opposition of the Lord who became servant. This emphasis on

¹⁹ While Barth makes fairly regular mention of the *munus triplex*, it is significant (though inconclusive) that he never offers an extended analysis of the historical or biblical foundation of the *munus triplex* in such a way as to draw upon it for his own constructive project. Admittedly, he offers exegetical excursions in proportion to the controversiality of his thesis, and this thesis is not particularly controversial. However, if the *munus triplex* is as structurally significant as Butin and others suggest, I would expect more in this regard than Barth in fact offers.

lordship and servanthood furthermore explains the emphasis on obedience and humility throughout this section (cf. CD IV/1, p. 417), which has little to do with features unique to the priestly office and everything to do with the Lord who became our servant in obedience to the Father.

Why then does Barth offer such a staunch affirmation of the relationship between the *munus triplex* and his own material exposition, when it appears that the *munus triplex* does not play a significant role after all? To answer this question we turn to one of his key statements on this theme.

In light of this we shall have to consider the whole event of atonement twice over, examining it in detail.²⁰ The correct titles for these first two sections will be 'Jesus Christ, the Lord as Servant' and 'Jesus Christ, the Servant as Lord'. We shall still follow the traditional path to the extent that in content and meaning this division corresponds exactly (*als diese Einteilung der Sache nach und im Sinn genau mit dem Zusammentrifft*) to what earlier dogmatics worked out as the doctrine of the high-priestly and kingly office of Christ (in the framework of that doctrine of the threefold office of Christ in which they used to picture his work). I prefer the first two titles as more precise and also more comprehensive (*präziseren und zugleich umfassenderen*) (since they also include the earlier doctrine of the person of Christ). (CD IV/1, p. 135; KD 148)

Butin, for one, emphasises the 'exact correspondence' mentioned by Barth.²¹ One could note as well that the only difference mentioned by Barth between his and the traditional view is that the former includes the 'doctrine of the person of Christ' (CD IV/1, p. 135).²² Earlier, Barth claimed that the

²⁰ Shortly thereafter Barth incorporates the third dimension into his account.

²¹ Butin, 'Two Early Reformed Catechisms', p. 201.

²² One possible difficulty with this position is that Barth seems to suggest elsewhere that the *munus triplex* integrates the doctrines of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Remarking on the *munus triplex* as found in the Geneva Catechism, he notes: 'According to the Apostles' Creed, whatever Christ is he does. What comes next is simply the execution, the working out of what his name and title indicate. Therefore whatever is said about the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ will simply repeat and explain this: he is king, priest, prophet of the Holy Spirit.' Barth, *Faith of the Church*, p. 69. This, according to Robert Peterson, is in keeping with Calvin's original intent for the *munus triplex*: 'in chapter xv [of the *Institutes*, book II], Calvin via Christ's threefold office of prophet, king and priest, forms a bridge between preceding and subsequent chapters of *Institutes* II . . . [This] was one of Calvin's ways of telling his readers not to separate the person and work of Christ.' Robert A. Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement* (Fearne, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2008), p. 60. Cf. François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 224.

tradition distinguished the person and work of Christ too rigidly, using the *munus triplex* to account for the latter (CD IV/1, p. 123).

Barth's point in this passage, though, does not go so far as to indicate that the *munus triplex* has a formative role in his thought. In fact, the net effect is ambiguous. Barth follows the tradition 'to the extent that in content and meaning' his own view 'corresponds exactly to what earlier dogmatics worked out as the doctrine of the [*munus triplex*]', though he notes that he prefers his own titles 'as more precise and also more comprehensive'. Where does the emphasis lay? Does Barth's account take up the tradition within a bigger picture, or does the tradition provide the foundational framework for his own work? The qualification 'to the extent that' places the *munus triplex* in a distinctly secondary role, as does Barth's claim that his own titles are more precise and comprehensive. And though he explains that this precision and comprehensiveness is due to its inclusion of the 'doctrine of the person of Christ', this does not exclude the possibility of further factors (which Barth does not here mention) making them a more fitting choice.

My sense is that this passage is inconclusive – the primary evidence lies in the role played by the *munus triplex* in Barth's doctrine of reconciliation. And as we have seen, correlating the *munus triplex* with Barth's account of sin as pride, sloth and falsehood is problematic. But if we correlate these aspects of sin with Barth's preferred categories ('Lord as Servant', 'Servant as Lord', and 'the Servant Lord/True Witness') a correspondence readily emerges: pride contradicts the humility of the servant, sloth opposes the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and falsehood is the antithesis of the Servant Lord who as such is the 'true Witness'.

Accordingly, we should interpret Barth as including within his account the role, material and concerns of the traditional doctrine of the *munus triplex* (for, as usual, he is eager to adhere to the Reformed tradition wherever possible), while doing so only inasmuch as it corresponds to his own fuller and more comprehensive exposition. Despite his affirmations concerning the significance of the *munus triplex*, his hamartiology consistently draws upon his own christological structure, whereas the *munus triplex* offers little or nothing to the argument.²³ In other words, Barth claims that his view coincides with doctrine of Christ's threefold office, thereby emphasising his proximity to the tradition, while correcting the misuse of the *munus triplex* by taking it up within his own more precise and more comprehensive framework. Despite the strength of some of his assertions, therefore, Barth is not in fact building his account on a 'subterranean structure'²⁴ of the *munus triplex*, but rather

²³ References to it occur largely in the context of summary statements.

²⁴ Butin, 'Two Early Reformed Catechisms', p. 200.

using that doctrine as something of a gloss to his own account, so as to show its compatibility with the Reformed tradition.

Turning briefly to Barth's treatment of Christ's atoning work, we see once more the minor role played by the *munus triplex*. First, note that Barth's account of the 'Judge Judged in Our Place' (CD IV/1, §59.2) is forensic rather than sacrificial, despite the fact that in this part-volume Barth supposedly follows Christ's priestly work. This is all the more significant because of the conclusion of this section, where Barth develops the sacrificial standpoint of Christ's work in a recapitulation of his argument (CD IV/1, pp. 274–83). Barth notes that his forensic/judicial treatment of the atonement, while functioning in harmony with Christ's priestly work, is distinct from it.²⁵ That Barth shows thereby 'how each of his previous points could be effectively restated in terms of the priestly and sacrificial language of the *munus Christi sacerdotale*' only accentuates the fact that he does not in fact do this. Moreover, Barth critiques the 'older Protestant dogmatics' because even though they gave

to the doctrine of the work of Jesus Christ the title *munus Christi sacerdotale* . . . their expositions under this title did at their heart slip into forensic notions (which . . . were applied in a way that was more or less foreign to the Bible itself) . . . and did not bring out the specific features in the cultic standpoint and terminology. (CD IV/1, pp. 274–5)

If Barth critiques the older Protestant dogmatics on such grounds, surely we cannot argue that Barth's forensic treatment of the atonement is in fact a validation of the shaping influence of Christ's priestly office in his thought. In short, Barth is quite clear that his primary development of the atoning work of Christ is anything but an account governed by Christ's priestly office.

Justyn Terry likewise senses that Barth's use of the *munus triplex* is in some way problematic. He notes that Barth interprets justification 'in terms of the humbling of the Son of God who enters the far country to overcome the pride of humankind'.²⁶ But while Terry senses the incongruity between Barth's hamartiology and the *munus triplex*, his solution differs:

Would this not instead lend itself better to an exposition of kingship in terms of humble servanthood? Then the high-priesthood of Christ could be unfolded in terms of defeating the sin of sloth by actively responding to the call into the holy presence of God . . . By means of this exchange in his structure of high-priesthood and kingship, Barth could have made

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 202–3. Is Barth critiquing the older Protestant dogmatists for the same mistake he is making?

²⁶ Justyn Terry, *The Justifying Judgement of God: A Reassessment of the Place of Judgement in the Saving Work of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Paternoster, 2007), p. 112.

it clearer that when he speaks of Jesus the judge, he is referring to Jesus the king²⁷

Unfortunately this solution resolves certain difficulties only by attributing to Barth a blatant structural error, and should thus be used only as a last resort. Furthermore, it does not answer my earlier questions regarding the material relationship between the *munus triplex* and Barth's hamartiology. In short, it creates more problems than it solves.

On my reading, Barth's affirmation of the *munus triplex* distracts Terry from the structure of the doctrine of reconciliation. In sum, Barth is eager to demonstrate that his account is consistent with the traditional schema of the *munus triplex*, but the decisive shaping influence comes from his own distinctive christological framework. His affirmation that 'we shall still follow the traditional path [of the *munus triplex*]' (CD IV/1, p. 135), therefore, ought to emphasise the qualifier ('to the extent that'), not because the *munus triplex* conflicts with his position, but because the latter is 'more precise and also more comprehensive'. While he is eager to note the correspondence between his account and the traditional Reformed view, my thesis accounts for the surprisingly sparse development of traditional and biblical accounts of Jesus Christ's threefold office as well as the frequency with which the details of Barth's account fail to mesh with the relevant 'office' of Jesus Christ.²⁸

Simply put, the primary force energising the material and formal content of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation lies elsewhere than the traditional doctrine of the *munus triplex*.²⁹ Christ's role as priest, king and prophet, while

²⁷ Ibid. Terry might have drawn on Barth's connection between Jesus' kingship and justice: 'Jesus is king. He preserves and defends a dominion and its participants. To do so, he is just and living.' Barth, *Faith of the Church*, p. 66.

²⁸ This is not surprising. The *munus triplex* offers a promising framework for integrating the Israelite theocracy into our understanding of the person and work of Christ. Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and James Stuart Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1968), pp. 439–40. While this is an admirable strength, why should we limit our attention to the 'theocratic' aspects of Israel? Why omit a consideration of Jesus as shepherd, wisdom and husband? Furthermore, while salvation is from the Jews and Jesus is the promised Messiah, must we not also consider him in light of scriptural aspects of his being and work which are not inherently or uniquely Jewish? In other words, the *munus triplex* offers too limited an approach to the person and work of Jesus Christ inasmuch as it is used as a sufficient conceptual framework.

²⁹ An alternative is that Barth employs the *munus triplex* flexibly and creatively, and my argument is overly rigid. The problem is that the *munus triplex* becomes increasingly superficial and dangerous in direct proportion to the schema's generality or looseness with regard to the biblical development of its concepts. Inasmuch as we find ourselves creatively developing the meaning and significance of Christ's high-priestly office,

significant for Barth, ultimately distracts those seeking to understand his hamartiology and doctrine of reconciliation, if focused upon too rigidly.³⁰

Schemas without schematising: using the *munus triplex*

The result of over-reading Barth's statements concerning the *munus triplex* is a series of structural and biblical difficulties which distract from Barth's focus. This is precisely the danger of schematic thinking which Barth so adamantly opposes – what at first seems to be a fruitful framework rooted in scripture takes on a life of its own, hampering our appreciation of and submission to the Bible. My concern with contemporary uses of the *munus triplex* (such as those of Sherman, Wainwright and Williams) is that, despite its elegance and usefulness (particularly for integrating the theocratic aspects of Israel into Christ's work), this framework is simply too constricting to be of abiding service to the church in offering sufficient conceptual unity to Christ's saving work. To put the point more positively, it is a significant though insufficient aid to the church's understanding, and must be complemented by other approaches to the work of Christ.

The limitations of this scheme are directly related to its greatest strength. For as Schleiermacher notes, the *munus triplex* 'make[s] clear the relation of the Kingdom of heaven to this earthly theocracy [of Israel]' by representing Christ 'as uniting all these three offices in Himself'.³¹ Clearly this is a tremendous benefit, offering the church great resources for understanding the person and work of Christ in light of the Old Testament, and rendering the latter more fruitful in the preaching of the church.

However, before drawing upon the *munus triplex* to create a comprehensive account of the unity of Christ's work, we must consider how the theocratic offices of Israel are related to Israel as a whole. Do they subsume its other elements within themselves, such as the marriage relationship, poets, shepherds and the role of kinsman redeemer? While many of these offices,

apart from the specific meaning of that office as witnessed by scripture, we are better off employing a category more suited to the task at hand. For if it is not the biblical account of the high-priestly office which energises and sustains our thought while simultaneously constraining it, what is playing that role?

³⁰ We do best, concerning Barth's hamartiology, to think of Barth's analysis of sin as being 'in relation to the self-humbling action of God in Jesus Christ . . . God's exaltation of humanity to partnership with God in Jesus Christ . . . [and] in relation to the true and radiant witness of Jesus Christ'. The *munus triplex* adds nothing essential to this framework. Cf. Daniel L. Migliore, 'Sin and Self-Loss: Karl Barth and the Feminist Critique of Traditional Doctrines of Sin', in *Many Voices, One God* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 1998), p. 147.

³¹ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, pp. 439–40.

roles, vocations and relationships can and do overlap, are they not distinct, each possessing its own unique significance within the history and vocation of Israel? What is to prevent us from expanding beyond the constraints of the *munus triplex*, to consider Jesus Christ in such ways as the bridegroom, wise man, servant, shepherd and kinsman-redeemer, in addition to his role of priest, king and prophet?

A second question lies close on the heels of the first: while Jesus fulfilled in his person and work the vocation of Israel (including its theocratic offices), is this a sufficient framework from which to understand Christ's work? If so, then what do we make of the host of concepts employed throughout the New Testament to explain Christ's work?³² While some of these relate more closely than others to the Old Testament offices of priest, king and prophet, does integrating them under this rubric strengthen and invigorate the New Testament concepts, or do some of them become weaker and less poignant in the process? While this remains an open question, it is clear that we must allow the integration of the *munus triplex* with these concepts to be an exegetically driven conclusion rather than a presupposition, in order to ensure that we allow each of these concepts to play their own distinct role in contributing to our understanding of the work of Christ.

With these reflections in place, we do well to return to Calvin – the one largely responsible for the prominence of the *munus triplex* in the past half-millennium. As Robert Peterson notes, 'Calvin uses six biblical themes of the atonement to describe the saving work of the Mediator.'³³ Leaving to the side the precise nature of these themes and the question of whether they ought to be revised or expanded, this point is significant because Calvin used the *munus triplex* as one part of a full account of Christ's work rather than a sufficient conceptual scheme by means of which to unify the whole. In other words, the *munus triplex* is an important though limited conceptual device rooted in scripture to account for certain aspects of Christ's work, particularly as it relates to the Old Testament theocracy.

What might this mean for the use of the *munus triplex* in the church's teaching ministry? First and foremost, the church should use this schema as a way of integrating the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Messiah

³² The New Testament explains Christ's death and resurrection in such diverse ways as a ransom (Mark 10:45), seeking that which is lost (Luke 15), defeat of Satan (John 12:31 and 14:30), propitiation (Rom 3:25), justification of God (Rom 3:25), justification of sinners (Rom 5:18), Passover (1 Cor 5:7), redemption (Gal 4:5), reconciliation (Col 1:20) and payment of our debt (Col 2:14), to name but a few. While many of these are deeply rooted in the Old Testament, some also have a strong relationship to the Graeco-Roman context.

³³ Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement*, p. 61.

or anointed one of Israel, with the history of that people and particularly its offices of prophet, priest and king. Such a line of thought opens up a host of interconnections, tensions and questions between the Old and New Testament which are of great value to its teaching ministry.³⁴ Second, we should be cautious in our use of this schema lest it take on a life of its own and outstrip the biblical foundation upon which it rests – for Calvin and Barth would agree that while the *munus triplex* is valuable, in and of itself it does not sufficiently explain the work of Christ. Finally, integrating these two points, we should use the *munus triplex* as an impetus for understanding and employing other dimensions of the people and history of Israel which Jesus takes up and fulfils. For if the *munus triplex* is significant but insufficient, this motivates our appropriation of further aspects of the person and work of Christ in order to give a fuller account.

Conclusion

A popular approach to the unity of Christ's work today is to employ the *munus triplex* towards that end. While Barth does not explicitly argue against such a manoeuvre, neither, upon closer inspection, does he support such an attempt, and in fact seeks to offer a more precise and comprehensive framework for understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ which takes up within it the concerns of the *munus triplex*. Despite certain of his claims which seem to indicate otherwise, we find in Barth one who appreciates the significance and role of the *munus triplex*, yet is cautious about finding therein sufficient conceptual resources to account for the unity of Christ's person and work. Those seeking to understand Barth's doctrine of reconciliation do well, therefore, to focus upon his christological framework of 'the Lord as Servant, the Servant as Lord and the Servant Lord'. This does not mean that we should discard the *munus triplex*, however, for it offers considerable resources to the church for understanding the relationship of Christ to the people and history of Israel. The key to its use lies in resisting the temptation to over-schematise this concept, using it for the modest but significant resources it offers in conjunction with other aspects of the person and work of Christ.³⁵

³⁴ As Barth notes, the *munus triplex* opens up a perspective in which 'the Old Testament . . . contains a truth, but this truth points beyond itself: this truth announces the New Testament which, for this very reason, is already contained yet concealed in the same truth'. Barth, *Faith of the Church*, p. 61.

³⁵ Thanks to Phil Butin, Justyn Terry and Jeremy Treat for comments on earlier drafts of this article.