WHY ARE YOU CALLED A CHRISTIAN?  
QUESTION 32 OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

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INTRODUCTION

In connection with the question of the identity of a Christian in the context of society, it seems useful to me to consider what one of the Reformed confessions says about this subject. I am speaking about the *Heidelberg Catechism* (*HC*) as one of the sources from which we may get information for our reflection.

For this purpose, in this article I will reflect on question and answer 32, in which the point arises: Why are you called a Christian? It is remarkable that the *HC* places the question of the identity of a Christian in a Christological perspective. The *HC* discusses Christology on Sundays 11 through 19. The present question surfaces on Sunday 12, when the name of Christ is discussed. As a theme directly derived from this, the question about the Christian is asked. In the course of this article, it will, I hope, become clear why it is important that we do not place the question about the identity of a Christian in a pneumatological perspective that is distinct from Christology; but rather, in a Christological frame.

**Question 32 reads as follows:**

‘But why are you called a Christian?’ The answer is:

‘Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing, so that I may confess his name, offer myself as a living sacrifice of gratitude to him, and fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life, and hereafter rule with Him in eternity over all creatures.’

This answer points to the prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices of a Christian as a derivation of the triple office of Christ.

H. Kraemer once wrote a book called *A theology of the laity* that became well-known and was translated into Dutch under the expres-
sive title, *Het vergeten ambt in de kerk.*¹ In this book he pleaded for more-attention to the common parishioners in church rather than for the official office-holders. What the *HC* says in question 32 is in line with what Kraemer said. At the same time, with the specific term ‘Christian,’ the *HC* raises the office above the difference between what the Dutch theologian Van Ruler called the ‘particular’ and ‘general’ office.²

The Christian offices of prophet, priest, and king take shape in both the official general, and in the particular office. They need each other. They complement each other, as I will try to illustrate in this article.

What I want to do is first to see what the text in *HC* 32 exactly says, and look for its deeper theological meaning. Next, I will ask what this means for the question of the identity of a Christian today. This article consists of the following sections:

1. Christians and Christ
2. The *anointing* of the Christian
3. The Christian as prophet
4. The Christian as priest
5. The Christian as king
6. The relationship between the three offices
7. Some conclusions.

*Christians and Christ*

A Christian is a human being who belongs to Christ. That is the essence of his identity. The relation between us and Christ is essential. The point in our identity is not that we have a Christian worldview or philosophy of life in the same way as other people have other ideologies or outlooks on life. Rather, the point is that our identity is qualified by the relationship and unity with a *person*, Jesus Christ. Here we already note the importance of the Christological perspective on the identity of a Christian. This is in line with the earliest information about Christians in the congregation of Antioch in Acts, chapter 11. In that city, the term ‘Christians’ does not refer to a specific political or social group, but to people who, in spite of all kinds of internal differences, had one similarity; namely, that they believed in Jesus Christ and lived in relation to Him.