CHAPTER THREE

PROPHET:
CALVIN AS AUTHORITATIVE
INTERPRETER AND REFORMER

Two quotations introduce this chapter. In Calvin’s lecture on Amos 7: 10–131 he comments on the failure of the priests:

... why were the priests appointed? That they might be the messengers of the Lord of hosts, as is stated by Malachi, “The people shall seek from the mouth of the priest my law, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts;” (Malachi 2: 7). Amaziah then ought especially to have performed himself the Prophet’s office, for he was a priest. He was indeed, I allow, a spurious priest; but having claimed so honorable a name, he ought to have discharged its duties: this he did not and conceded that title to the prophet. So now our mitred bishops are very liberal in conceding titles, ‘O, Mr. Teacher, you can indeed see and understand many things: but yet you ought, at the same time, to consult the peace of the community.’ They call those teachers who have been invested with no public office, but are yet under the necessity of undertaking the duties of others, for they see that these mitred bishops are dumb dogs. In a like manner, also, did Amaziah act towards the Prophet Amos; for he was content with his own splendor and great pomp, and with his own riches; he lived sumptuously, and enjoyed a rich booty, and superstitions well warmed his kitchen. He therefore easily surrendered to others the title of a prophet: in the meantime, he prided himself on his priesthood.2

His comments from a later lecture on Micah 3: 11, 12 are more striking.3

Here the difference can be observed between prophets and priests. For Micah ascribes here the office or the duty of teaching to the priests and leaves divination alone to the prophets. We have said elsewhere that it

1 The text: “Also Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away into the land of Judah and there eat bread and prophecy there’.” The Latin from Calvin’s lecture is: Et dixit Amazias ad Amos, videns, vade, fuge in terram Iehudah, et comede illic panem et illic propheta (CO 43: 127).
2 CO 43: 131–132.
3 The text: “Her heads judge for reward, and her priests teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the Lord, and say, Is not the Lord among us? none evil can come upon us. Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the
happened through the idleness of the priests that prophets were added to them. For prophesying (vaticinia) belonged to them until being content with the altar they neglected the office of teaching (reliquerrunt docendi munus); as also we see has happened in the papacy. For though it be sufficiently clear for what reason pastors were appointed over the church, yet we see in the papacy all those who arrogantly claim the title of pastors are dumb dogs. Why is this? Because they think that they discharge their duties by being attentive only to ceremonies, and they have more than enough to occupy them. For in the papacy the priestly office is exceedingly busied with trifles and histrionics but they meanwhile neglect the most important thing (praecipuum), that is that they should feed the Lord's flock with the doctrine of salvation. So in this way, the priests under the law had become degenerate. What is said by Malachi ought to have been perpetually continued, that is, that the law should be in the mouth of the priest that he should be the messenger and interpreter of the God of hosts. But the priests spurned this office. Therefore it was necessary that prophets be raised up outside of the normal order of things (quasi extra ordinem prophetas excitari) while nonetheless the regular form of things remained.

The context of both these quotes, already introduced in the last chapter, will be recalled. After the failure of numerous colloquies, Calvin had urged the emperor to take up the reforming of the church. The result was the Interim and Peace of Augsburg. The Pope had already let his intentions be known, the Council of Trent having convened twice by this time. Thus both ecclesiastical and civil authorities had, in Calvin's opinion, failed categorically.

Where in this scenario were the priests? They had discarded their calling and were busying themselves with "trifles," says Calvin. Thus, in these quotations, Calvin states that when the priests fail in their duties, God takes from them their authority. They are no longer to be heard and respected as God's spokespersons. And this verdict, Calvin says specifically, applies not only to the Old Testament priests but also to Rome: "as also we see has happened in the papacy." (We, of course, saw that the priests had failed in Calvin's judgement from his sermon on Jeremiah 18: 17–18; on which more anon). Now, the idea that the Roman hierarchy had forfeited its authority to be heard was not new. It could be found in the writings and sermons of Calvin's contemporaries. Thus,

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