Jon Balserak


Jon Balserak’s *John Calvin as Sixteenth-Century Prophet* is the newest addition to the already sizable corpus of his writings on the Genevan reformer. His research so far includes a fine study of Calvin’s doctrine of accommodation, about a dozen journal articles and book chapters, and a splendid full length monograph on Calvin’s lectures on the Minor Prophets. The book under review is the perfect *segue*, as it turns scholarly attention to the significance of prophecy for Calvin. Countering traditional opinions, Balserak argues that not only did he hold to the continuation of this office, but identified himself as a prophet and trained others to become prophets.

Quite rightly, Balserak situates Calvin’s views against the background of patristic, medieval, and early modern thinking on prophecy. The overview of the centuries-old discussion of the prophetic office from Augustine to Aquinas shows how prophecy was not always understood as foreknowledge of the future or prediction of apocalyptic events. It also meant the interpretation of God’s will to contemporaries. In the early modern period, humanists from various theological allegiances from Erasmus to Cardinal Cajetan and François Lambert articulated the position that prophecy is interpretation of scripture. The magisterial reformers agreed that the core of prophecy was the interpretative more than the predictive gift. Against the claim of the “Heavenly Prophets” (Karlstadt, Müntzer) and the Anabaptists, that any Christian prompted by the Spirit could be God’s mouthpiece, they equated the prophetic office with the ministerial office. Both the Lutherans and Reformed stressed that prophets are not those who produce new doctrinal revelation, but rather those who rightly expound scripture and proclaim the word of God, who admonish against idolatry and call for repentance and renewal of the church. Essentially, Calvin followed his fellow reformers, both his predecessors (Luther, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Conrad Pellican) and contemporaries (Bucer, Bullinger, Vermigli). However, he did not concur with those who held that the supernatural gift of revealing God’s secret will ceased to function following the apostolic era. The Genevan reformer kept the door slightly open for the possibility that God can and does raise prophets *extra ordinem*, whenever the church has special need of them, mostly in case of failure of the ordinary ministry.

Unquestionably the two most closely argued and impressive chapters in the book are chapters three and four, where Balserak embarks, against the consensus of traditional scholarship, on a far-reaching and learned account of Calvin’s self-understanding as prophet. While any summary of this complex narrative
has to omit many details, the two arguments put forward for consideration are as follows. First, Balserak argues: consciously or unconsciously Calvin fitted himself into the exceptional category of prophet extra ordinem. He understood himself to be not simply like the prophets, but “believed himself to be God’s mouthpiece” (p. 96). His behavior, even “the way he [Calvin] addresses kings, and also popes, betrays his conviction that he speaks with an authority which excels either” (p. 89). Second, Balserak underscores that in pursuit of his prophetic calling, Calvin sought to secure France for the gospel and drew on prophetic books to train ministers who would preach and teach in the mostly underground French Reformed Church, promoting a mission (from 1555 on) that involved warfare in defiance of the state power (p. 180). Balserak goes on to qualify this argument: “In point of fact, the war which commenced in 1562 represents, this monograph argues, the culmination of years of preparation by Calvin ... And, this study contends, Calvin grew increasingly convinced that it would have to come through war; that that was the only option still available. Accordingly, Calvin depicted war, in his training lectures to his ministerial candidates, as a holy calling” (p. 181).

I would like to express approval and support for a great deal of what Balserak is seeking to achieve in this part of the work. With his profound knowledge of Calvin’s lectures on the Old Testament prophets (Minor Prophets, Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah-Lamentations, and Ezekiel), keen philological rigor, and a refined literary taste he has shed new light on these (relatively) well known texts running to hundreds of pages. They appear to us as a valuable sample of Calvin’s exegesis, which indeed is remarkable for critical sagacity and profound historical sense, but also for the ability of the reformer to relate ancient text to current events, so that they may become relevant to the debates of his day.

That said, I do not recognize his portrait of Calvin. Nor am I comfortable with the role in which Balserak seeks to cast the reformer in his grand narrative. As one who believes that Balserak is absolutely right to say that “Calvin was not a theologian abstracted from his era” (p. 183), I do not think the evidence supports conclusively or even suggestively some of his surmises, such as that Calvin “pursued and promoted the war, reluctantly but willfully” (p. 180). Certainly, his language was belligerent and his theology had its political implications, and those who have attempted to show otherwise, demonstrably fail to explain this important facet of Calvin’s thought and especially the conviction that fueled it. Nevertheless it strains the imagination of a Waldensian like me, whose ancestors where severely rebuked by Calvin for taking up arms against the duke of Savoy in 1561 to defend their Calvinist faith, to see that Balserak provides no evidence to back up the reformer’s sharp criticism of that armed warfare. In addition, Calvin was not afraid to make absolute claims against those with whom