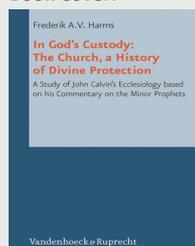


# An image of the church in Calvin's commentary on the Minor Prophets

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In God's Custody: The Church, a History of Divine Protection. A Study of John Calvin's Ecclesiology based on his Commentary on the Minor Prophets (Reformed Historical Theology, vol. 12)

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## Review Title:

An image of the church in Calvin's commentary on the Minor Prophets

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This work, volume 12 in the growing series *Reformed historical theology* (H.J. Selderhuis), is the culmination of Harms's PhD study. It focuses on Calvin's ecclesiology based on the commentary on the Minor Prophets. As the author rightly points out, relatively few major studies have been dedicated to Calvin's ecclesiology, and in addition these are already quite dated (for instance, P.J. Richel's study *Het kerkbegrip van Calvijn* of 1942 and Charles B. Milner's *Calvin's doctrine of the church* of 1970). This study is therefore a valuable contribution to this topic. There is also a tendency in current research into Calvin for more specialised studies, that is, studying specific topics in a limited genre. Harms's study on Calvin's ecclesiology from his commentary on the Minor Prophets falls within this tendency.

The author states that he has opted for a combined historical and systematic approach, although a third, comparative element should be added. These three elements form the three parts of this study.

In the first part the author aims to place Calvin in his own context during the period when the latter lectured on the Minor Prophets (1556–1558). The value of a historical placement cannot be overstated as it has often been a 'basic error in Calvin research' to regard 'everything that occurred in Geneva in Calvin's day as a special case, the like of which cannot be found in any other time or place', as E. Pfister noted in *Calvins Wirken in Genf* (1957:11). Therefore Harms does well with his aim of placing Calvin in his own context.

In a kind of staccato fashion, important events in Geneva, Europe and Calvin's personal life pass the revue. However, the author probably does not make enough effort to integrate these historical events and to show their relevance to Calvin's commentary on the Minor Prophets; because of this, this chapter loses some of its value to the rest of the study. After all, the purpose of placing Calvin in context is not merely to give an overview of historical facts that have been documented numerous times already, but rather to connect – in this case – the commentary on the Minor Prophets with the historical context, in a way that highlights the colour and emphasis of this specific commentary.

Part 2 contains the bulk of this study, and is also the most important in its value to Calvin scholars. In it Harms does a commendable job of systematising Calvin's teaching on the church in his commentary on the Minor Prophets. Topics such as election, covenant and worship are especially important in Calvin's ecclesiology; the only question I have is on what basis the author decided on the different topics and their sequence of discussion, which comes across as somewhat forced, almost like the *loci* of a systematics textbook, which – as often in the reformed tradition – follows a similar pattern to the one Harms employs.

The specific nature and context of the Minor Prophets provide the lines that can be found throughout Calvin's commentary. Elaboration on one specific and dominant line is in order here. Calvin sees the ancient church, broken up into the illegitimate and apostate 10 tribes and the legitimate Southern Kingdom of Judah, reflected in the situation of his own day, whereby the Papists form the parallel to the 10 tribes and the newly reformed church forms the parallel to the 2 tribes of Judah. The former needs to be reunited with the latter under one spiritual head (David as type of Christ) if they are to have any hope of restoration. This theme constantly returns in Calvin's commentary and gives him the justification for the Reformation against the claims and accusations of Rome. This view on the ancient church subsequently determines Calvin's view on election, and brings him to a distinction between a general and a specific election. It also plays its part in his view on worship, where he suggests a degree of similarity between the Roman Church's ceremonial worship and that of the northern kingdom.

The purpose of part 3 is to give an overview of the ecclesiological aspects that can be found in the exegesis of the Minor Prophets amongst commentators in the Early, Medieval and Reformation

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eras. The author himself says (p. 195) that this overview is brief and thus necessarily incomplete. This brevity is not helped by the fact that the author, within roughly 15 pages (at least 10 of the 25 pages of part 3 are devoted to Calvin's own principles and practice in the interpretation of Scripture), tries to cover all of the first 16 centuries, discussing at least 15 theologians who wrote commentaries on some or all of the Minor Prophets. This discussion at times becomes so broad, and with a lot of references to secondary rather than primary sources, that it loses its impact. This part could have gained value if the author had discussed only one representative from each of the eras.

The part on Calvin's exegetical principles and practice, however, is of great value. It shows how Calvin stayed true to the principles he had already identified in the preface to his commentary on Romans in 1539. In the preface to Calvin's commentary on Hosea the author identifies three principles: pursuit of the original author's mind as closely as possible, edification of the children of God, and simplicity in explaining the text.

Despite the abovementioned criticism of parts 1 and 3 of this study, it still remains of great value for grasping

Calvin's multifaceted ecclesiology. Although Calvin says that he discusses doctrinal topics in the *Institutes* so that it will not be necessary for him to divulge on them in his exegetical works (see his letter to the reader in the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*), the latter still remain a goldmine for understanding the reformer's doctrinal views. True, it is harder to filter the necessary information on Calvin's ecclesiology from his commentaries than it is to open book 4 of the *Institutes*, but the result is surely satisfying. Without deviating from what he wrote on this topic in his *magnum opus*, Calvin's commentaries still open horizons and provide emphases that are unique to a specific biblical text. Therefore, this tendency of studying specific topics from a limited genre should be valued and continued by Calvin scholars. Harms surely shows that Calvin's ecclesiology still retains its usefulness to the church in the 21st century, a question he leaves open to the judgement of the readers of his study (p. 14), but one I have the pleasure of answering in the affirmative.

## References

Pfister, E., 1957, *Calvins Wirken in Genf*, Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, Neukirchen.