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Autopistia : the self-convincing authority of scripture in reformed theology

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1 Truth and Certainty

Scripture is so foundational for the Christian faith that the question how it gains authority is one of the most essential theological issues. Reformed theology states that Scripture has its authority of its own (*autopistia*) and that this is recognized through the work of the Spirit (*testimonium*). This study examines the background of the theological concept of *autopistia* and its function for the authority of Scripture in the shifting historical contexts of Reformed theology. In the final chapter the theological implications are discussed. Historical research and systematic theological evaluation are distinguished, but not separated in this study. Listening carefully to the voice of the Reformed tradition is helpful us to understand and articulate the Reformed position today.

Much research has already been done on Calvin's concept of Scripture. There are studies on the importance of Scripture for his theology in general and on his concept of inspiration in particular.¹ Calvin's concept of the work of the Spirit has been examined and the *testimonium Spiritus sancti* has received attention.² The authority of Scripture in the development of Reformed orthodoxy has also been studied.³

Although it is generally acknowledged that the concept of *autopistia* is essential for the Reformed position on Scripture, thus far no specific study has been made of the background and meaning of the term. The important relationship between the *autopistia* of Scripture and the *testimonium* of the Spirit is often mentioned but not explained.⁴

¹ J.A. Cramer, *De heilige schrift bij Calvijn*, Utrecht 1926. D.J. De Groot, *Calvijns opvatting over de inspiratie der Heilige Schrift*, Zutphen 1931. R.S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, Edinburgh [etc.] 1953. E.A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, New York 1952. T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, Grand Rapids 1959. H.J. Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin's Doctrine of Biblical Authority*, Stanford 1962. A. Ganoczy and S. Scheld, *Die Hermeneutik Calvins: geistesgeschichtliche Voraussetzungen und Grundzüge*, Wiesbaden 1983. W. Balke, *Calvijn en de bijbel*, Kampen 2003.

² J. Pannier, *Le témoignage du Saint-Esprit: essai sur l'histoire du dogme dans la théologie réformée*, Paris 1893. S. Van der Linde, *De leer van den Heiligen Geest bij Calvijn: bijdrage tot de kennis der reformatorische theologie*, Wageningen 1943. T. Preiss, *Le témoignage interieur du Saint-Esprit*, Neuchatel [etc.] 1946. W. Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* [Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte, vol. 7], Göttingen 1957. G.W. Locher, *Testimonium internum: Calvins Lehre vom Heiligen Geist und das hermeneutische Problem*, Zurich 1964. H.H. Eßer, 'Die Lehre vom "Testimonium Spiritus Sancti Internum" bei Calvin innerhalb seiner Lehre von der heiligen Schrift,' in *Verbindliches Zeugnis: Schriftauslegung-Lehramt-Rezeption*, ed. W. Pannenberg and T. Schneider, vol. 2, Göttingen 1995, 246–58.

³ P. Althaus, *Die Prinzipien der deutschen reformierten Dogmatik im Zeitalter der aristotelischen Scholastik: eine Untersuchung zur altprotestantischen Theologie*, Leipzig 1914. W. Neuser, 'Dogma und Bekenntnis in der Reformation: Von Zwingli und Calvin bis zur Synode von Westminster,' in *Die Lehrentwicklung im Rahmen der Konfessionalität*, ed. B. Lohse [Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte, vol. 2], Göttingen 1980, 165-352. R.A. Muller, *Holy Scripture* [2nd ed.] [Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, vol. 2], Grand Rapids 2003 [Muller, *PRRD* 2²].

⁴ R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte: Die Fortbildung der reformatorischen Lehre und die gegenreformatorische Lehre*, 4th ed., vol. 4.2, Graz 1954, 567. R.E. Davies, *The Problem of*

Concentration on the term αὐτόπιστος helps to avoid repeating what has been discussed by others.⁵

In the complicated relationship between Reformation and Reformed Orthodoxy both the continuity and the important shifts in emphasis are discussed. This study also shows how the Reformed heritage has been elaborated by Benjamin B. Warfield and Herman Bavinck, two representatives of the Reformed position at the close of the nineteenth century. In most cases the historical phases of Reformed theology are studied separately. The narrow focus on one aspect of the concept of Scripture – its *autopistia* – offers the opportunity to present a cross-section of the development of Reformed theology from Calvin's Geneva to the schools of Princeton and Amsterdam.

This first chapter offers an introduction from some dictionaries (1.1), a case study of the problem from the text of the *Belgic Confession* (1.2), and a formulation of the questions for theological consideration (1.3).

1.1 Introduction to the Term Αὐτόπιστος

The *Greek-English Lexicon* of Liddell and Scott gives a translation of αὐτόπιστος that corresponds with the etymology of the word: credible in itself.⁶ The etymology of a term does not determine its meaning, but it is important in the case of a compound. Πιστός has a theological connotation, something that deserves πίστις, faith or trust. It can be translated as 'to be trusted or believed' and is used of persons that are faithful, trustworthy or genuine, or of things that are trustworthy and sure that deserve belief or are credible.⁷ Something or someone that is trustworthy or honest is called πιστός; the word is used of witnesses (μάρτυρες) in a court. The adjective πιστός can also have an active sense and be translated as 'believing' or 'relying on'.⁸ The noun (το πιστόν) means a pledge, security or warrant.

The Greek language has many compounds that begin with αὐτο- and this prefix can be translated as 'by itself' or 'of itself'.⁹ If Scripture is called αὐτόπιστος this obviously does not mean that Scripture is to be believed by itself, but that it is 'to be trusted because of itself' or 'in itself'; its trustworthiness is independent of external ratification.

Authority in the Continental Reformers: A Study in Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, London 1946, 141. O. Weber, *Grundlagen der Dogmatik*, vol. 1, Neukirchen 1955, 266-271. H. Waldenfels and L. Scheffczyk, *Die Offenbarung: von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart: Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1.1b, Freiburg 1977, 18.

⁵ The concentration on specific terms in Calvin's theology is in line with a development in recent research on Calvin. The International Congress on Calvin Research focuses on the analysis of important theological terms in Calvin's theology. Cf. V.E. D'Assonville, *Der Begriff "doctrina" bei Johannes Calvin – eine theologische Analyse*, Münster 2001 16-17, n. 10. D'Assonville's study is a good example of this concentration. Another example is the article of M. Beintker, who lists and analyses Calvin's use of *relatio*. M. Beintker, 'Calvins Denken in Relationen,' *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 99 (2002), 109-129.

⁶ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1968, 281. We will discuss the references in chapter 3.

⁷ The noun (το πιστόν) means a pledge, security, or warrant. The word can also have an active sense 'believing, relying on' or 'trustful.' Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 1408.

⁸ Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 1408.

⁹ E.g., αὐτογράφος, αὐτοδίδακτος, αὐτόματος and αὐτόνομος. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 279-281.

The term αὐτόπιστος is often translated as self-evident, but in that translation the element of trust (πιστός) is not conveyed accurately; while the translation ‘to be trusted because of itself’ or ‘credible in itself’ is more a description of the meaning than a translation. In theological texts that refer to Calvin the term is sometimes translated as ‘self-authenticated’ or ‘self-authenticating,’ but this translation focuses too much on the genuineness and the origin of Scripture.

The difficulty in translating αὐτόπιστος lies in the double connotation of truth and trust. If Scripture is αὐτόπιστος, it is not only true, it also deserves our faith or trust. As we will yet see, in a philosophical context the term αὐτόπιστος means that a statement is convincing without further demonstration. The translation ‘self-convincing,’ generally used in this study is derived from this original philosophical context.¹⁰ This translation expresses both the truth-side and the trust-side of the term. It is preferred to ‘self-evident,’ because the element of πιστός and the biblical and theological connotation of faith is conveyed more accurately than in ‘self-evident’. Still the element of trust in πίστις is not completely transmitted in the translation ‘self-convincing’; theologically spoken, the term means ‘self-convincingly leading to faith.’

A Greek term that comes close to αὐτόπιστος is ἀξιόπιστος, trustworthy.¹¹ This term is frequently paired with αὐτόπιστος as an attribute of Scripture in Protestant scholastic theology.¹² It has a different meaning than αὐτόπιστος, because a statement can also be trustworthy for external reasons. In our study of Reformed orthodoxy we will discuss both terms.

The difficulties in finding an adequate translation evoke the question regarding the relationship between the philosophical background and the theological use of the term αὐτόπιστος. What happens to a philosophical term when it is transmitted to the field of theology and used for the authority of Scripture? This question is especially interesting because in a theological context a term derived from the noun πίστις carries the connotation of Christian faith with it. To answer this question we will have to look closely at the introduction of the term into the semantic field of theology and at the sources that were used.

In modern dictionaries the derivatives of the Greek term αὐτόπιστος are absent.¹³ This was different in the nineteenth century; in *Meyers Konversationslexikon*, for instance, the term *autopistia* is defined as

¹⁰ For the translation of αὐτόπιστος as ‘convincing in itself’ or ‘self-convincing’ cf. T.L. Heath, *The Thirteen Books of Euclid’s Elements*, 3rd ed., vol. 1, New York 1956, 121-122.

¹¹ Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 171. Aristotle says that it is possible that certain female animals generate offspring from themselves, because there are no males. But there is no reliable (ἀξιόπιστος) proof; this has not yet been reliably (ἀξιόπιστως) observed. Aristotle, *Generation of animals*, ed. A.L. Peck, Cambridge 1953, 741a37, 204-205.

¹² R.A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, Grand Rapids (Mich.) 1985, 54-55.

¹³ The following dictionaries were consulted: *Webster’s third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, Springfield 1993; *Le grand Robert de la langue française*, Paris 2001; G. Wahrig, R. Wahrig-Burfeind, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Gütersloh 2000, and *Groot woordenboek der Nederlandse taal/Van Dale*¹², Utrecht 1992.

immediate trustworthiness that does not need special proofs. In systematic theology the characteristic of holy Scripture, according to which it gains faith by and for itself and has the ground of its trustworthiness in itself, without needing further witnesses and proofs.¹⁴

The word *autopistia* is also discussed in an extensive entry in the *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*. The dictionary refers to the Greek origin of the word: “from *autos*, one self; *pistis*, faith, trust,” and explains that in theology it refers to “immediate faith and is applied principally to the authenticity of holy Scripture as far as its divine origin is considered as evident *a priori* and not in need of any demonstration.”¹⁵ According to this article, *autopistia* corresponds with the *fides divina*, the immediate faith or the religious sentiment that does not need to rest on anything else. The *fides humana*, on the contrary, rests on the observation of real facts and is supported by human reason.

Adopting the principle of the *autopistia* means in a word that the Bible gains faith immediately, *a priori*, absolutely and by itself in the eyes of human beings, who must have a complete faith, without afterwards verifying and controlling their beliefs through the aid of their understanding.¹⁶

In the dictionary the concept of *autopistia* is criticized because it “supplies doctrinaire persons with great subterfuges. Whenever they accept the fight on the ground of the positive facts and are a little too quickly driven to the wall, they can take refuge there and hide themselves away in a shelter from every serious discussion.”¹⁷ The author deems this an easy and irrational escape, for instance, in the case of the existence of God. He allows the *autopistia* of Scripture, but he restricts it to a certain part. “Regarding the special *autopistia* of the Bible it is quite evident that that applies exclusively to the dogmatic part. For the whole historical part is subjected to the *fides humana*, to probability, to control, in one word to what is called the *axiopistia*.”¹⁸ Here *axiopistia* is rational while *autopistia* is irrational. As we will see, both terms were not

¹⁴ “unmittelbare, besonderer Beweise nicht bedürfende Glaubwürdigkeit; in der Dogmatik die Eigenschaft der Heiligen Schrift, nach welcher sie an und für sich Glauben verdient, den Grund ihrer Glaubwürdigkeit in sich selbst hat, ohne anderweitiger Zeugnisse und Beweise zu bedürfen.” H.J. Meyer ed., *Meyers Konversationslexikon: Eine Encyklopädie des allgemeinen Wissens*, 4th ed., vol. 2, Leipzig 1888-1889, 173.

¹⁵ “AUTOPISTIE s.f. (ô-to-pi-stî – du gr. *autos*, soi-même; *pistis*, croyance, foi). Nom sons lequel on désigne, en théologie, la croyance immédiate, terme qui s’applique principalement à l’authenticité de l’Ecriture sainte, en tant que son origine divine est considérée comme évidente *a priori* et qu’elle ne souffre aucune démonstration.” P.A. Larousse ed., *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle français, historique, géographique, mythologique, bibliographique, littéraire, artistique, scientifique, etc. etc.*, vol. 1, Paris 1866, 1002.

¹⁶ “Adopter le principe de l’*autopistie* c’est dire, en un mot, que la Bible mérite immédiatement, *a priori*, absolument, par elle-même, créance aux yeux de l’homme, qui doit avant tout croire, quitte ensuite à vérifier et à contrôler ses croyances à la aide de son entendement.” Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire* 1, 1002.

¹⁷ “qu’il présente de grandes ressources aux doctrinaires, qui peuvent lorsqu’ils acceptent la lutte sur le terrain des faits positifs, et qu’ils sont un peu trop vivement pressés, s’y réfugier et s’y mettre à l’abri de toute discussion sérieuse.” Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire* 1, 1002.

¹⁸ “Quant à la *autopistie* spéciale de la Bible, il est bien évident qu’elle s’applique exclusivement à la partie dogmatique. Pour toute la partie historique, elle est justiciable de la *fides humana*, de la vraisemblance, du contrôle, en un mot de ce qu’on appelle l’*axiopistie*.” Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire* 1, 1002.

always contrasted so sharply.¹⁹ The rationalistic theology of the nineteenth century apparently had some difficulty with an appeal to the *autopistia* of Scripture.

This critical approach to the term αὐτόπιστος leads to the question about the relationship between *autopistia* and reason. Does the self-convincing character of Scripture imply that it is impossible to prove or demonstrate its authority and does it imply a sacrifice of the intellect? What is the consequence of *autopistia* for apologetics? An appeal to the *autopistia* of Scripture can easily function as an easy escape. The *autopistia* of Scripture should not be misused as a shelter to hide away from appealing theological problems.

1.2 The *Belgic Confession* (1561)

The term *autopistia* is not used in the Reformed confessions, but the question how Christians are assured of the authority of Scripture is discussed, for instance in the *Confessio Belgica*, composed by Guido De Bres (1522-1567) as an apology for the persecuted Reformed Christians.²⁰ The articles 3-7 deal with the authority of Scripture. The third article makes a distinction between the spoken and written Word of God and the fourth article lists the sixty-six canonical books of Scripture. The fifth article says:

We receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith. And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them – not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God. For even the blind themselves are able to see that the things predicted in them do happen.²¹

This article explains why Reformed Christians believe in the canonicity of the sixty-six books of the Bible. The canon is not merely accepted because of the authority of the church, but because of the testimony of the Spirit and because they are self-convincing. Thus the first issue that is raised by the *Belgic Confession* regards the relationship between the *autopistia* of Scripture and the canon.

The confession seems to leave some room for the authority of the church. It says that we receive and believe the canonical books “not so much because the church

¹⁹ Cf. Muller, *Dictionary*, 54.

²⁰ It was translated from French into Dutch in 1562 and accepted at the Synod of Antwerp in 1566 and definitively at the Synod of Dort in 1618. J. Van Engen, ‘Confession,’ in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W.A. Elwell, Grand Rapids 1984, 132.

²¹ “Nous recevons tous ces livres là seulement pour saints et Canoniques, pour regler, fonder, et establir nostre foy: et indubitablement croyons toutes les choses qui sont contenues en iceux, non pas tant, pour que l’Eglise les recoit et approuve tels ; mais principalement, pour ce que le S. Esprit nous rend tesmoignage en nostre coeur qu’ils sont de Dieu, et aussi qu’ils sont approuvez tels par eux-mesmes, quand les aveugles mesme peuvent appercevoir [1566: sentir], que les choses adviennent qui y ont esté predittes. [1561: quand ils disent quelque chose, ainsi aduient.]” J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften: in authentieke teksten*, 2nd ed., Amsterdam 1976, 76. The English translation is from the *Doctrinal Standards of the Christian Reformed Church*, adopted by the synod of the Christian Reformed Churches in 1985 and published in the back of the *Psalter Hymnal*. Cf. *Psalter Hymnal: Including the Psalms, Bible Songs, Hymns, Liturgical Forms, Ecumenical Creeds, and Doctrinal Standards of the Christian Reformed Church in North America*, Grand Rapids 1987. For an older translation and for the French text cf. P. Schaff and D.S. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, Grand Rapids 1993, 383-436.

receives and approves them.” The *Belgic Confession* does not completely reject that authority. It does not say “not because the church receives and approves them” or “only because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts.” The antithesis is: “not so much..., but above all.”²² The church is not the foundation of our faith in Scripture, but it does play a role in the reception of Scripture. We do not believe Scripture exclusively because of the witness of the Spirit, but “above all” or “principally.”²³ This leads to the question which role is left for the church if Scripture is *αὐτόπιστος* and faith depends on the *testimonium* of the Spirit.

The *Belgic Confession* says that the Scriptures “prove themselves to be from God.” It is important to notice how the *autopistia* of Scripture is expressed here. In the official Dutch translation the word “proof” is predominant; the Scriptures “have the proof of their divine origin with themselves.”²⁴ The *autopistia* seems to mean that Scripture contains the evidences or marks of its divine origin. The French edition, however, says that “the Scriptures are approved as such by themselves.” The expression “approved as such” (*approuver tels*) is also used for the approval of the church. We receive the Scriptures as holy and canonical not so much because the Church approves them but because they approve themselves. In other words, the Scriptures are not forced on us by an external authority, but they force themselves on us with their own divine authority. This leads to a third point of interest; in our historical survey we will have to examine how the term *αὐτόπιστος* is related to the marks or evidences of the authority of Scripture.

The English translation of the *Belgic Confession* places the *testimonium* of the Spirit and the *autopistia* of Scripture next to each other. We believe the Scriptures because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God and also because they prove themselves to be from God. This leads to the question how the *testimonium* of the Spirit and the *autopistia* of Scripture are related. In the French edition the *testimonium* of the Spirit and the *autopistia* of Scripture are not independent of each other, but are intimately connected to each other. It says that we believe the Scriptures “because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God and also that they are approved as such by themselves.” The repetition of the words “that they are” (*qu’ils sont*) indicates that the *testimonium* of the Spirit also governs the *autopistia* of Scripture; the Spirit not only gives testimony in our hearts of the divine origin of Scriptures, but also of their *autopistia*. We believe the Scriptures because the Spirit witnesses to us that they are divine and self-convincing. The Dutch translation of the final edition connects the *testimonium* and the *autopistia* in a different way; it says that “the Holy Spirit gives witness in our hearts that they are from God, because they also

²² Behind this statement stands the wording of the *Gallic Confession* (1559): “Nous cognoissons ces livres estre canoniques et reigle trescertaine de nostre foy: non tant par le commun accord et consentement de l’eglise, que par le tesmoignage et interieure persuasion du saint esprit.” *Gallic Confession*, art. 4. Cf. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, 76. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* 3, 361.

²³ The French text has “*principalement*” and the Dutch text “*inzonderheid*.” Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, 76-77.

²⁴ “dewijl zij ook het bewijs van dien bij zichzelf hebben.” Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, 77.

have the proof thereof with themselves.”²⁵ We believe the Scriptures because the *testimonium* teaches us that they are divine because they are self-convincing. Finally the Dutch translation of the original version (1561) placed the *testimonium* and the *autopistia* next to each other. It said that we believe the Scriptures “because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts and also because they are proved by themselves as such.”²⁶ These differences reveal that the editors and translators of the *Belgic Confession* were not completely certain about the relationship between the *testimonium* and the *autopistia* of Scripture. Thus the fourth question derived from the *Belgic Confession* regards the relationship between *testimonium* and *autopistia*. Are the *testimonium* and the *autopistia* independent sources of our faith in the Scriptures or does the Spirit witness through the Scriptures to the Scriptures? The tension in the texts and translations of the *Belgic Confession* show how complicated the relationship is.

The text that was accepted by the Synod of Antwerp (1566) differs from the original text. The original edition (1561) has: “...and also that they are approved by themselves, for if they say something it thus happens.”²⁷ The edition of Antwerp has: “...and also that they are approved by themselves, for even the blind themselves are able to sense that the things predicted in them do happen.”²⁸ In the final edition (1619) the verb “sense” (*sentir*) is changed into “perceive” (*appercevoir*).²⁹ The source of this sentence is not clear.³⁰ The textual change has often been criticized and interpreted as a

²⁵ “omdat ons de H. Geest getuigenis geeft in onze harten, dat zij van God zijn; dewijl zij ook het bewijs van dien bij zichzelve hebben.” Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, 77. This statement is sometimes interpreted as if it said: “because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves.” Cf. the English translation given above. The Dutch translation does not say: “en dewijl zij ook het bewijs van dien bij zichzelve hebben.”

²⁶ “om dat de Heilige Geest in onzer herten getuygt ende ooc om dat sy door haer selven uoor sulcks bewesen worden.” Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, 77. This translation, titled *Belydenisse des gheloofs*, is from 1562. The translator and the printer are not known. Cf. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, 21-23.

²⁷ French: “et aussi qu’ils sont approuvez tels par eux-mesmes, quand ils disent quelque chose, ainsi aduient.” Dutch: “ende ooc om dat sy door haer seluen uoor sulcks bewesen worden, als sy yet segghen, ende dat het also gheschiet.” Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, 76-77.

²⁸ French: “et aussi qu’ils sont approuvez tels par eux-mesmes, quand les aveugles mesme peuvent sentir, que les choses adviennent qui y ont esté predittes.” Dutch: “dewijl zij ook het bewijs van dien bij zichzelve hebben: gemerkt de blinden zelven tasten kunnen, dat de dingen die daarin voorzegt zijn, geschieden.” Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, 76-77. The 1985 translation has “the blind themselves are able to see that the things predicted in them do happen.” The nuance of “feeling” is lost there. The older translation is better: “the very blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are fulfilling.” Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* 3, 387.

²⁹ “quand les aveugles mesme peuvent appercevoir, que les choses adviennent qui y sont predittes.” Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Belijdenisgeschriften*, 76.

³⁰ In his study of the sources of the *Belgic Confession* E.M. Braekman distinguishes four streams. First of all, he mentions three documents of the Dutch Reformed exiles, namely the *Catechism of A Lasco* (1551), the *Confession of London* (1551) by J. A Lasco and the *Confession of Glasgow* (1551) by V. Poullain. Cf. J. A Lasco, *Opera tam edita quam inedita*, ed. A. Kuyper, vol. 2, Amsterdam 1866, 293-475. V. Poullain, *Liturgia sacra (1551-1555)*, ed. A.C. Honders, Leiden 1970, 171-209. In the second place Braekman mentions the work of G. De Bres, *Le*

weakening of the original emphasis on the *testimonium*.³¹ In any case, the textual development of the *Belgic Confession* suggests an intrinsic tension at this point.

The original text simply states that if the Scriptures say something it happens; Scripture is proved because its words become true.³² The final edition elaborates this statement, saying that the blind can perceive the fulfillment of the prophecies. It is not clear who are meant by the blind. Possibly the reference is to the Jews, because the fulfillment of the prophecies is mentioned, but then the remark does not seem to make sense.³³ The expression can also be a general metaphor; Scripture is so clear to those who have the witness of the Spirit, that even if one was blind, one could sense (*sentir*) it. Finally, the addition can also refer to the unbelievers as a category; Scripture is so clearly fulfilled that even spiritually blind unbelievers have no excuse.³⁴

The final edition does not say that there are two ways to become sure of the authority of Scripture, one by the witness of the Spirit and the other by considering the fulfillment of the prophecies. It does not disconnect the *autopistia* from the *testimonium*, but it says that the Spirit witnesses to the believers that the Scriptures so prove themselves that even the blind are able to perceive the fulfillment of the prophecies. The issue of the relationship between the blind unbelievers and the *autopistia* of Scripture is important for this study. The fifth question to which the *Belgic Confession* leads us regards the possible apologetic function of the *autopistia* of Scripture. The question is whether the self-convincing character of Scripture can be helpful to explain how unbelievers become believers, how the blind gain sight.

In other Reformed confessions the self-convincing authority of Scripture is also emphasized, for instance in the *Confessio Helvetica Posterior* (1566). The opening

baston de la foy chrestienne, Lyon 1555. In third place comes T. Beza, *Confessio Christianae fidei*, [Geneva] 1560. The fourth stream consists of the *Gallic Confession* with its sources. E.M. Braekman, 'Les sources de la Confessio Belgica,' *Bulletin Commission de l'histoire des églises Wallonnes* 7 (1961), 3-24, 23. The *Baston* is an anthology of texts from Scripture and the church fathers. In these sources an immediate reference to the blind that sense the truth of Scripture is lacking.

³¹ Cf. W. Verboom, *Kostbaar belijden: de theologie van de Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis: met preekschetsen*, Zoetermeer 1999, 100. J. Koopmans, *De Nederlandse geloofsbelijdenis*, Amsterdam 1939, 48-49. Th.L. Haitjema, 'De autopistie der Heilige Schrift en het getuigenis des Heiligen Geestes,' *Onder eigen vaandel: Drie-maandelijksch theologisch tijdschrift* 14 (1939), 218-233, 219-220. Cf. A.D.R. Polman, *Onze Nederlandsche geloofsbelijdenis, verklaard uit het verleden, geconfronteerd met het heden*, vol. 1, Franeker [1948], 226-231. Polman rejects this criticism.

³² It is possible that De Bres originally also had the prophecies of Scripture in mind. The fulfillment of the prophecies is one of the main arguments for the authority of Scripture in Calvin's *Institutes*. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.8.7-1.8.8, *OS* 3, 76-77.

³³ Blindness is a common metaphor for the unbelief of the Jews. Augustine says: "The unbelief of the Jews increases rather than lessens the authority of the books, for this blindness is itself foretold." Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 16.21, *PL* 42:329. Many other quotations from the church fathers and the Reformers could be added.

³⁴ Calvin says that the blind can find God by feeling or groping after him and that this leaves the unbelievers without excuse. J. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.5.3, *OS* 3, 47. Cf. his commentary on Acts 17:27, *CO* 26, 415.

sentence of the first chapter, titled “Of the Holy Scripture Being the True Word of God,” says:

We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.³⁵

The *Confessio Helvetica Posterior* discusses the tension between the external Word and the internal illumination by the Spirit, although the emphasis lies more on the preaching of the Word than on Scripture itself. Although no one can come to Christ unless the Holy Spirit inwardly illumines him, yet it is the will of God that his Word should be preached outwardly also. This was confessed against the Radical Reformers, who emphasized the work of the Spirit at the expense of the authority of the written and preached Word.³⁶ That the Spirit may not be disconnected from the Word is a cardinal point in Reformed theology and seems to be still relevant in a time of increasing charismatic influence in the Reformed churches worldwide.

Finally, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) also deals with the self-convincing authority of Scripture, the *testimonium* of the Spirit, and the evidences:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to a high and reverent esteem of the holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.³⁷

The *Westminster Confession* places a stronger emphasis on the evidences of Scripture than the older confessions. We will have to examine whether there is a development in the Reformed tradition at this point. The *Westminster Confession* also says that Scripture evidences itself to be the Word of God *by* the mentioned arguments. The *autopistia* is defined as the result of arguments; not of extrinsic arguments such as the antiquity of Scripture or the fulfillment of its prophecies, but of intrinsic arguments in the text of Scripture. It is an important question for our historical research how the *autopistia* of Scripture and the intrinsic and extrinsic arguments are interrelated. The *Westminster Confession* relates the *testimonium* closely to the Word; the Spirit witnesses *per verbum* and *cum verbo*.³⁸ It is therefore also important for the right understanding of the *autopistia* of Scripture to examine how the *testimonium* works in its intimate relationship with Scripture.

³⁵ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* 3, 831.

³⁶ E. Koch, *Die Theologie der Confessio Helvetica Posterior*, [Neukirchen] 1968, 33.

³⁷ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.5, Cf. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* 3, 602-603.

³⁸ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* 3, 603. This implies that, although the authority of Scripture only becomes clear to us through the work of the Spirit, the *testimonium* is no revelation of the Spirit next to Scripture itself. J. Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften: von Zürich bis Barmen*, Göttingen 1987, 46.

1.3 Historical and Theological Questions

Although the relationship between certainty and truth is at stake and some aspects of the *autopistia* of Scripture touch philosophical issues, epistemological or hermeneutical questions are not dealt with in this study. This is a theological study; the interest is in the relationship of a special kind of certainty and a special kind of truth: the certainty of faith in the truth of Scripture.

This study deals with a development in Reformed theology. The main question is how the certainty of faith in the truth of Scripture has been and can be articulated in Reformed theology. The main tool to answer this question is the term αὐτόπιστος. This question has a historical and a theological side. The historical part of the study discusses how the term has been introduced, how it has been used, and how it has been related to the authority of the church, to the evidences or proofs of Scripture, and to the *testimonium* of the Spirit. This historical research leads to the theological question if and how the *autopistia* of Scripture can be helpful for Reformed theology today.

The historical survey is not an end in itself, but a means to analyze the development of Reformed theology on the issue of the authority of Scripture. Analyzing the use and meaning of one single term αὐτόπιστος means running a risk. It is very easy to misrepresent the development with such a narrow focus, because other essential elements in the doctrine of Scripture can be overlooked. On the other hand, this narrow approach is the only way to cover the historical development without ending in generalities. If the idea that Scripture is self-convincing is essential for the Reformed position, then the development of the use and meaning of the term αὐτόπιστος must reveal something about the development of the concept of authority and the doctrine of Scripture as a whole. This method cannot lead to a complete survey of the doctrine of Scripture, but it can show where and why essential decisions have been made. This study highlights a development in Reformed theology; a cross-section is not the whole apple, but hopefully it will be helpful to understand the apple.

We have studied the history of Reformed theology with a theological interest, as an exercise in listening. The theological conclusions are intended as applications of the historical research within the context of Reformed theology. This implies that this study does not deal with hermeneutical questions and that a discussion with or evaluation of other positions on the authority of Scripture is omitted. The theological development in the twentieth century – for instance the position of Karl Barth (1886-1968) – is not covered in this study, not only because a thorough discussion of that development would carry beyond the limits of this book, but also because this development has been influenced by fundamentally different philosophical and hermeneutical questions. In the shift from the historical to the theological part of this study these questions are intentionally skipped, because they would bring the study out of balance. The study focuses on the *autopistia*, and then turns to the question what the concept of *autopistia* implies for Reformed theology today. Therefore this study should not be understood as an attempt to defend the authority of Scripture – as we will see, that would be contradictory to its *autopistia* – but as a reconsideration of the implications of the *autopistia* of Scripture within the framework of Reformed theology.

We have sought to understand the theological implications of the use of the terminology in the different contexts of the Reformation, Reformed orthodoxy and Reformed theology at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The purpose of

our historical research is to listen carefully to the voices of the Reformed tradition and to apply what we have found there to the Reformed concept of the authority of Scripture today, with the intention to distinguish carefully between historical research and theological evaluation without separating them.³⁹ Transparency regarding one's theological interests and motives is a prerequisite to avoid the trap of a biased view of the historical development.

The questions formulated in this chapter will be helpful to keep focus on the *autopistia* of Scripture. The dictionary entries, for instance, led to the question about the relationship between the philosophical background of the term and its theological use and to the question about the relationship between *autopistia* and reason. We will see if and how the philosophical background of the term was accounted for in the Reformed tradition and whether the use of this term implied a sacrifice of the intellect. We will also have to take this philosophical background into account in our theological conclusions.

Our study of the *Belgic Confession* led to five questions. 1. What are the implications of the self-convincing character of Scripture for the canon? 2. If Scripture is αὐτόπιστος, which role is left for the church regarding the authority of Scripture? 3. Does Scripture prove itself via a set of marks or does it have an intrinsic power to convince us? 4. How are *testimonium* and *autopistia* related; do they depend on each other? 5. How can unbelievers become convinced of the *autopistia* of Scripture?

According to the *Second Helvetic Confession*, the Word is the criterion for the internal work of the Spirit. The *autopistia* of Scripture originally stood in between the Catholic claim of the authority of the church and the spiritualistic claim of the immediate revelation of the Spirit. The text of the *Westminster Confession* indicates a shift in emphasis to the evidences of Scripture compared with the older confessions; the *autopistia* is defined as the result of the evidences. The *Westminster Confession* also relates the *testimonium* closely to the Word itself; the Spirit witnesses by and with the word, again highlighting the importance of the right understanding of the relationship between the *autopistia* of Scripture and the *testimonium* of the Spirit.

These questions show that the *autopistia* of Scripture is related to the *testimonium* of the Spirit, to the authority of the church, and to the evidences; this threefold relationship serves to structure this study. In the historical part the answers to the questions of this introduction will be gathered. In the final theological evaluation the harvest will be reaped.

³⁹ Van der Kooi's study on Calvin and Barth is an example of the usefulness for Christian dogmatics of studying historical theology. He states that "dogmatic reflection is impossible without involving its own particular situation in the reflection." C. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God: A Diptych* [Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, vol. 120], transl. D. Mader, Leiden 2005, 1-2.