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The Netherlands

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

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Citation

Belt, H. van der. (2006, October 4). *Autopistia : the self-convincing authority of scripture in reformed theology*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4582>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Autopistia

Autopistia

The Self-Convincing Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van
de graad van Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus Dr. D.D. Breimer
hoogleraar in de faculteit der Wiskunde en
Natuurwetenschappen en die der Geneeskunde,
volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties
te verdedigen op woensdag 4 oktober 2006
klokke 15.00 uur
door

Hendrik van den Belt

geboren te Leeuwarden
in 1971

Promotiecommissie:

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De uitgave van dit proefschrift is mede mogelijk gemaakt door de steun van:
Ridderlijke Duitse Orde, Balije van Utrecht
Stichting Aanpakken
De Gereformeerde Bond in de Protestantse Kerk

**Dedicated to the blessed memory of
Kornelis Van den Belt
(1927-2004)
a father, teacher, and pilgrim.**

Maneat ergo hoc fixum,
quos Spiritus sanctus intus docuit,
solide acquiescere in Scriptura,
et hanc quidem esse αὐτόπιστον,
neque demonstrationi et rationibus subiici eam fas esse:
quam tamen meretur apud nos certitudinem,
Spiritus testimonio consequi.

J. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.5 (1559)

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Abbreviations

- CO* J. Calvin, *Joannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss, Braunschweig [etc.], 1863-1900.
- COR* *Ioannis Calvini Opera omnia denuo recognita et adnotatione critica instructa notisque illustrate*, ed. B.G. Armstrong et al., Geneva 1992-.
- OS* J. Calvin, *Joannis Calvini Opera selecta*, ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel, Munich 1926-1936.
- PG* *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.P. Migne, Paris 1857-1912.
- PL* *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne, Paris 1844-1890.
- TRE* *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. H.R. Balz, G. Krause, G. Müller, and S.M. Schwertner, Berlin [etc.] 1977-2004.

Preface

One time I explained the theme of my theological studies to the members of my congregation by telling them that I was examining the meaning of one single Greek term for several years. They looked at me in bewilderment. To be honest, it also astonishes me that the term αὐτόπιστος has become such a fascination.

In the spiritual climate in the churches of the Dutch Secession, in which I was brought up, the question of the assurance of salvation was very important. My personal faith and spiritual life were fostered in the atmosphere of the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism. The emphasis was on the work of the Spirit and the experimental knowledge of sin and grace.¹ In my spiritual development the problem of the relationship between truth and certainty first took the form of the question of personal assurance.

The question of assurance of salvation remained fascinating to me during my theological study at the University of Leiden.² The emphasis, however, shifted from personal questions to those regarding the certainty of the Christian faith and the authority of Scripture. The problem of the relationship between truth and certainty was centered in the question of the trustworthiness of Scripture. In fact the pietistic question how the promises of the gospel, that are true in themselves, can be accepted, was reversed. I believed that the promises were true for me, but I wondered how I could know that Scripture was really trustworthy.

In this period I came across Herman Bavinck's *The Certainty of Faith*.³ Though this booklet was written more than a century ago, I was gripped by Bavinck, whose background lay in the churches of the Secession, and who had also studied in Leiden. He articulated the tension between experimental faith and academic theology. Bavinck placed theology in the context of a personal relationship with God and refused to take his starting point in empty neutrality. At the close of my studies I wrote a thesis on *The Certainty of Faith* and especially on the tension in the booklet between the objective certainty of the Christian faith and the subjective certainty of the Christian.⁴ Comparing

¹ It is difficult to translate the Dutch term *bevindelijk* into English. The idea behind the word 'experimental' is that the faith of a Christian is not in the head but in the heart, that faith is proved in the spiritual life of a Christian. Alternatives are 'existential' and 'experiential' but the first word is colored by philosophy and the second places too much emphasis on the experiences of the Christian, while 'experimental' refers to the Christian faith that is tried and proved in practice.

² I compared Jonathan Edwards's *Religious Affections* with Thomas Shepard's *Parable of the Ten Virgins*, which is frequently quoted by Edwards.. H. Van den Belt, 'De kenmerken van de genade: Een vergelijkend onderzoek naar Thomas Shepards *Parable of the Ten Virgins* (1660) en Jonathan Edwards' *Religious Affections* (1746)' [Unpublished M.A. Thesis], 1994. J. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. J.E. Smith [The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 2], New Haven 1959. T. Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins, Opened and Applied* [The works of Thomas Shepard, vol. 2], Ligonier 1990.

³ H. Bavinck, *De zekerheid des geloofs*, 3rd ed., Kampen 1918. The references to this booklet are from this edition except when a different edition is mentioned. Cf. H. Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. H. Der Nederlanden, St. Catharines 1980.

⁴ H. Van den Belt, 'Geloofszekerheid tussen objectief en subjectief: Een analyse van Herman Bavincks dogmatische positie in *De zekerheid des geloofs* (1901)' [Unpublished M.A. Thesis],

the book with Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* I found a key to the relationship between objective truth and subjective certainty in his concept of the *testimonium* of the Holy Spirit. Through Bavinck I discovered that the problem of the relationship between truth and certainty is intertwined with the relationship between object and subject. Bavinck rejected subjectivism, but I was not completely convinced that he had been successful.

One of the reasons for my dissatisfaction was my interest in evangelistic outreach work. In the missionary context of a postmodern society subjectivism seemed both attractive and dangerous. Thus the question how the certainty of faith could be properly communicated in this context was subjoined to the problem of truth and certainty.

The fascination for the relationship between truth and certainty led to this study. The first intention was to examine the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* in the Reformed tradition, starting with Calvin and tracing the development down to Bavinck. Soon the interest shifted from the *testimonium* to the *autopistia* of Scripture. It appeared too comprehensive to cover the complete development of the *testimonium* and the Greek term αὐτόπιστος announced itself as a means to narrow my studies. The way in which Calvin used the term in the *Institutes* pointed to a certain tension between the self-convincing power of Scripture and the *testimonium* in the hearts of the believers. The terms *testimonium* and *autopistia* were of importance for Bavinck's concept of the authority of Scripture and for his epistemology. It seemed interesting to compare Calvin and Bavinck at this point and to find out the connecting links. A. Van de Beek's intuition that in Calvin's concept truth and certainty come together in the term αὐτόπιστος, challenged me to examine the relationship of the *autopistia* of Scripture and the *testimonium* of the Spirit.⁵

Thus this study was shaped by the pietistic spiritual climate in which I grew up, by the confrontation with the historical-critical approach to Scripture at the University, by my critical admiration of Herman Bavinck, by my interest in the communication of the gospel, and, finally, by the feeling that truth and certainty meet each other in the *autopistia* of Scripture.

1995.

⁵ Cf. A. Van de Beek, *De adem van God: de Heilige Geest in kerk en kosmos*, Nijkerk 1987, 41-43. A. Van de Beek, *Schepping: de wereld als voorspel voor de eeuwigheid*, Baarn 1996, 63-64. A. Van de Beek, 'Being Convinced: On the Foundations of the Christian Canon,' in *Canonization and Decanonization*, ed. A. Van der Kooi and K. Van der Toorn [Papers presented to the International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR) held at Leiden 9-10 January 1997], Leiden 1998, 331-349, 339.