

*The Authority of Scripture in Reformed  
Theology: Truth and Trust*

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Henk van den Belt

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Henk van den Belts Buch stellt eine historische Studie des Begriffs *autopistos* und dessen theologischen Derivates *autopistia* dar, wie er im Hinblick auf die Bibel in der reformierten Theologie gebraucht wird. Seine Studie erstreckt sich von Calvin bis zur reformierten Orthodoxie, B.B. Warfield und Herman Bavinck, und schließt mit Anwendungen von *autopistia* im postmodernen Kontext. Die Vorzüge dieses Buches, zahlreich wie sie sind, liegen eher im Bereich historischer Wirklichkeit als Imperative für die Gegenwart. Für den Großteil des Werkes bleibt Van den Belt der historischen Entwicklung des Begriffs *autopistia* verpflichtet; dazu gehört eine gründliche und sorgfältige Erforschung der Geschichte des Begriffs und der entsprechenden Lehre.

SUMMARY

Henk van den Belt's book is a historical study of the word *autopistos* and its theological derivative *autopistia* as used about the Bible in Reformed Theology. His study extends from Calvin to the Reformed orthodoxy, B.B. Warfield and Herman Bavinck, and he concludes with applications of *autopistia* to the postmodern context. The merits of the book, of which there are immense amounts, are in the historical indicatives rather than in the contemporary imperatives. In the majority of the work, Van den Belt remains devoted to the historical development of *autopistia* with thorough and careful research of the history of the term and its accompanying doctrine.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet ouvrage est une étude historique consacrée au mot *autopistos* et à son dérivé *autopistia* tels qu'ils ont été utilisés à propos de la Bible dans la théologie réformée. L'étude couvre de Calvin à l'orthodoxie réformée, avec Warfield et Bavinck et l'auteur conclut par des applications de la notion d'*autopistia* dans le contexte post-moderne. Les mérites de cet ouvrage, qui sont considérables, résident dans les indicatifs historiques plutôt que dans les impératifs contemporains. Dans sa majeure partie, l'auteur se consacre à l'aspect historique et livre le fruit d'un travail de recherche approfondi et rigoureux sur l'histoire de l'usage du mot *autopistia* et de la doctrine correspondante.

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Henk van den Belt's *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* is a historical study of the word *autopistos* and its theological derivative *autopistia* in Reformed theology. Van den Belt's study arose from his personal struggles growing up in the churches of the Dutch secession. He held a 'fascination

for the relationship between truth and certainty' which led him to study the relationship between *autopistia* and the *testimonium* of the Spirit about the Scriptures. His study extends from Calvin to the Reformed orthodoxy, B.B. Warfield and Herman Bavinck, and he concludes with applications of *autopistia* to the postmodern context.

Although *autopistos* is most commonly translated as 'self-evident', van den Belt prefers 'self-convincing', which better captures the sense of the truth of Scripture and the trust which it commands. In chapter two, he explores Calvin's use of the concept *autopistia* as the *fons* of its use in theology, tracing Calvin's thought through the *Institutes* and through his polemical writings. The culmination of Calvin's doctrine is the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* where he uses the word *autopistos*. Van den Belt concludes that, according to Calvin, for those taught by the Spirit Scripture is absolutely trustworthy 'in and of itself'.

In chapter three, the author traces the source of *autopistos* and Calvin's initial interaction with the term. He concludes that Calvin may have introduced it to the theological discussion but that he was not innovative: the concept was present in Luther, Zwingli, Bucer and Melancthon. Chapter four examines the usage of *autopistia* in Reformed orthodoxy with central attention to Whitaker, Junius, the Arminian controversy, Turretin and Voetius. In the age of Reformed orthodoxy *autopistia* became a major polemic tool. A central development in the period was the institutionalisation of Scripture as the *principia* of theology.

In chapter five, Van den Belt reviews Benjamin B. Warfield's response to the historical-critical approach and to modern science. In Warfield's inaugural address in 1879, he affirmed the historical-critical method as long as it remained free from naturalistic presuppositions. Unlike Calvin, for Warfield self-authentication 'meant that Scripture proves itself by the *indicia*'. Chapter six reaches the historical climax with Herman Bavinck. According to Van den Belt, in the midst of modernity, the relationship between objective truth and subjective certainty was foundational in Bavinck. He developed a two-fold *principium*: objectively, the revelation of God in Scripture is the *principium externum*; subjectively, accepting Scripture by faith is the *principium internum*. Bavinck's use of *principium* contributes to an organic view of revelation. Van den Belt concludes with Bavinck that trustworthy knowledge is gained when objective revelation is completed by the internal work of the Spirit in bringing forth faith. The final chapter sets forth Van den Belt's view on the use of *autopistia* in a postmodern context. For him the *autopistia* of Scripture corrects the postmodern idea of autonomy, gives meaning to Scripture in the face of postmodern hermeneutics and gives the Church its proper place as a witness.

Van den Belt's work, originally a Leiden University PhD thesis of 2006, is a valuable and unique contribution to historical-theological studies on a subject. He



hardly references any current discussions on the historical concept of *autopistia* because, as he rightly states, 'no specific study has been made of the background and meaning of the term'. One of the most helpful contributions is Van den Belt's resolution of the problem of the relationship between truth and certainty. Using *autopistia* as a metaphor, he resolves this tension: 'The *testimonium* of the Spirit is like an oral confirmation of a witness in court to the written report of the facts ... we either reject a witness or believe him but we cannot reject a witness from the facts.'

Van den Belt's careful historical analysis will remain highly valued by Reformed theologians in the years to come. However, his methodology contains some minor weaknesses. His attempt to limit the study to the term *autopistos* results in a lack of attention to the magisterial Reformers in the third chapter. Confusingly, Van den Belt seems to abandon this limitation in his treatment of Warfield. Like some Reformers, Warfield used the term only once, in a quote from Heinrich Heppe. Further distinction would also have been helpful between Reformed and Lutheran conceptions of self-authentication. For example, the Lutheran theologian Echter Nach offered a similar historical-theological development of *autopistia* in his 1952 essay. Because Van den Belt decided not to treat the twentieth century, he passes over Barth and others, but his treatment of Bavinck's works does not fit this limitation. Barth use of Bavinck's language of *Deus dixit* in the *Church Dogmatics* provided a possible bridge by which to treat Barth.

Lastly, while the historical analysis in this work is exemplary, some of the applications to postmodernism do not necessarily follow. Even if the reader agrees with the author on defending Scripture in a postmodern context, his treatment of postmodernism does not fit in the frame of the study. The work suddenly moves from what 'was' to what 'we ought'. For instance, in the conclusion of chapter two, after analysing Calvin's *consensus ecclesiae*, Van den Belt concludes that 'the evidences for Scripture are no longer convincing, due to the historical-critical approach to Scripture. ... If we want to look for convincing arguments ... we will have to be children of our own time'. These conclusions are given without detail and do not necessarily follow from the chapter. Additionally, in the final chapter, Van den Belt argues that 'the *autopistia* of Scripture is in danger of evaporating in a postmodern context' but he does not provide the 'who' of his concerns resulting in a generalisation of the problem. Thus the merit of this book, of which there is an immense amount, is in the historical indicatives rather than in the contemporary imperatives. Overall, the reader will receive the gift of patient, accurate historical research that can aid the student in any number of Reformed studies.

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*Eine baltisch-adlige Missionarin bewegt Europa.  
Barbara Juliane v. Krüdener, geb. v. Vietinghoff  
gen. Scheel (1764–1824)*

Debora Sommer

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die umfangreiche Dissertation der Schweizer Kirchengeschichtlerin Debora Sommer führt das Leben und missionarische Wirken der Freifrau Juliane von Krüdener (1764–1824) eindrucksvoll vor Augen. Die baltischstämmige Adelige erreichte nach ihrer Bekehrung als radikalpietistische missionarische Einzelgängerin nicht nur einfache und bürgerliche Stände. Sie wirkte auch auf einflussreiche Adelige in Ländern Europas, besonders auf Zar Alexander I. Daher wird ihr Name zurecht immer wieder im Zusammenhang der Heiligen Allianz zur Bekämpfung Napoleons genannt. Breiten Einfluss hatte Juliane durch die religiösen Salongesellschaften und Versammlungen außerhalb von Kirchen, die sie an vielen Orten Europas durchführte oder an denen sie teilnahm. Ein umfangreicher handschriftlicher Nachlass macht weitere Forschungen möglich – und nötig.

SUMMARY

The comprehensive dissertation of the Swiss church historian Debora Sommer pictures in an inspiring way the life and mission of Baroness Juliane von Krüdener (1764–1824). After her conversion, the noble lady of Baltic origin reached as a radical pietistic missionary and loner not only the simple people and the middle classes, but she also impacted the influential nobility in European countries, in particular Tsar Alexander I. Therefore, her name is rightly mentioned times and again in connection with the Holy Alliance against Napoleon. Juliane had a wide influence through religious parlour meetings and assemblies outside the church which she organised all over Europe or in which she participated. The presence of many manuscripts will enable further research – and also necessitates it.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse de l'historienne de l'Église Debora Sommer livre un tableau suggestif de la vie et de l'œuvre missionnaire de la baronne Juliane von Krüdener (1764–1824). Après sa conversion, cette noble originaire des Pays Baltes ayant adopté un piétisme radical a non seulement accompli une œuvre missionnaire auprès des gens du peuple et des classes moyennes, mais a eu une certaine influence sur la noblesse de divers pays d'Europe, et en particulier sur le tsar Alexandre I<sup>er</sup>. C'est pourquoi son nom est assez souvent mentionné, et à juste titre, en rapport avec la Sainte Alliance dirigée contre Napoléon I<sup>er</sup>. Elle a exercé une large influence par sa participation à des rencontres de salon religieuses, ou en prenant la parole devant des assemblées en dehors des Églises, dans toute l'Europe. De nombreux documents manuscrits permettraient, et même appellent, la poursuite de travaux de recherche à son sujet.