

Book Reviews

Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008, xiv + 386 pp. €89.00/\$132.00. ISBN 9789004163072.

Reviewed by John Bolt, Professor of Systematic Theology, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI, USA.

The testimony of the Holy Spirit in the self-authentication of Scripture is an important teaching of the Reformed tradition. Thus the Belgic Confession (art. 5) confesses that Christians “believe without doubt all things contained in [Holy Scripture]—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. . . .” Herein the Reformed tradition sets itself at odds with Tridentine Roman Catholicism, and vice versa. According to Vatican I not only is private interpretation considered a mistake because the Church is the only true interpreter of Scripture,¹ but also Vatican I decreed that the faithful cannot rely only on the testimony of the Holy Spirit alone without “external grounds” of the Church in order to accept Holy Scripture as the Word of God.² The Council even pronounced anathemas on those who deny that “faith can be made credible by external signs” and who seek only the “private” illumination of the Holy Spirit.³ Yet, remarkably, little serious

¹“Furthermore, in order to restrain petulant spirits, It decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall,—in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine,—wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church,—whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures,—hath held and doth hold; [Page 20] or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers; even though such interpretations were never (intended) to be at any time published. Contraveners shall be made known by their Ordinaries, and be punished with the penalties by law established” (Council of Trent, Fourth Session, ch. 3; Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolarum*, 30th ed., [2004], # 1507).

²Vatican I, Session 3, chapter 3; Denzinger, ##1789–1795.

³Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolarum*, # 1812.

scholarly attention has been paid to this important teaching, thus we are indebted to Professor Van den Belt (Free University of Amsterdam; University of Utrecht) for this fine study.

Van den Belt's concern in this monograph on the self-convincing character of Holy Scripture (αυτοπιστία) is hermeneutical in nature, that is to say, his concern is both historical and theological; specifically, Van den Belt aims to determine what αυτοπιστία meant for the Reformed tradition and what its relevance is for church and theology today. To achieve the former he provides five chapters surveying the Reformed theological tradition—Calvin (2 & 3), Reformed orthodoxy (4), Benjamin Warfield (5), and Herman Bavinck (6)—followed by a concluding interpretive chapter. By his own admission, a personal background in the spiritual climate of Reformed churches where assurance of salvation was an important issue combined with an interest in evangelistic outreach in a post-modern setting played a significant role in the author's choosing a deliberate hermeneutical approach over a strictly historical one. Though I am not a historian, it seems to me that Van den Belt's historical scholarship has not suffered because of this choice. The topic is carefully delimited, the research is thoroughly up-to-date on scholarship from Calvin through Bavinck, and the judgments are circumspect and balanced. By being transparent about his goals from the outset, Van den Belt is able to avoid the trap of tendentious and selective use of historical materials.

The question of *autopistia* “is related to the *testimonium* of the Spirit, to the authority of the church, and to the evidences [of Scripture's truth]” (p. 12). For Calvin, certainty about Scripture could not be guaranteed by the church nor proved by evidences; to attempt to do so would be to place one's trust in human judgment. Nonetheless, both are useful as secondary arguments for those who already believe. And here especially the church's role in leading someone to faith is important. The *testimonium* of the Spirit and the *autopistia* of Scripture are closely tied together in Calvin; there is no hint of the dual subject-object scheme that is found in Protestant scholasticism.

The heart of this work is Van den Belt's important claim that in

Reformed orthodoxy (and also in Warfield and Bavinck) a shift takes place away from a simple confessional understanding of *autopistia* toward thinking of it as a logical necessity for the *principium* of theology. The relationship between *autopistia* and *testimonium* is now increasingly expressed in terms of *externum* and *internum* with the *testimonium internum* serving as the subjective counterpart of the external authority of Scripture.

Van den Belt considers Warfield and Bavinck as two Reformed theologians who needed to wrestle with the historical-critical approach to the Bible in their affirmation of Scripture's authority. As is generally known, of the two, Warfield places much more importance on evidences as proof for Scripture's authority. Bavinck's thought is more subtle than Warfield's, and Van den Belt devotes a longer chapter to the Dutch neo-Calvinist. The treatment is clear and thorough; nonetheless, I have a minor quibble and one big question. On page 230 Van den Belt writes: "In his *Reformed Dogmatics* he opens every locus with biblical references, but continues with a historical survey of the specific theological doctrine. . . ." This is perfectly true but it overlooks Bavinck's important inclusion in each locus of theology of the universal religious interests of non-Christians to such matters as sin, the need for a mediator, salvation, and eschatology. This is at one level a minor quibble, but I also wonder if this oversight may not have played a role in what I consider a more significant issue, namely, whether Bavinck's discontinuity with Reformed orthodoxy—considering faith and not the Spirit as the *principium internum*—comes from Van den Belt's wrestling with the modern subject-object dilemma (pages 262ff.).

Beginning with G.C. Berkouwer's 1932 dissertation, it has been a staple of Dutch Reformed theologians, including R.H. Bremmer, Jan Veenhof and S. Meijers, to analyze Bavinck through the lens of the modern subject-object problem. While Van den Belt's treatment of Calvin and Reformed Orthodoxy is noteworthy for its scrupulous attention to current scholarship and its avoidance of the all-too-frequent dismissals of "scholasticism" that characterized so much of the Berkouwer tradition, I wonder whether he is also too preoccupied with the modern form of the subject-object discussion and

whether that is a fruitful approach to Bavinck. It is true that “both the Roman Catholic and Protestant analysis of the deepest ground of faith finally end in the religious subject” (p. 278; Bavinck himself says so in *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 583, # 150). But why is this a “problem”? Is this not obviously necessary when we are trying to explain how religious subjects come to certainty of knowledge about God and the world? Does not all knowledge come into being in the consciousness of the human subject? Where else could it be found? And why does Van den Belt consider this “disappointing” and suggest Bavinck’s tendency to subjectivism (pp. 29off.)? Is Bavinck here not simply being a good Augustinian or Thomist in his realism? (See, e.g., *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, # 449.) Van den Belt himself provides clues that suggest a different angle when he calls attention to the pedagogic importance of the church for both Warfield and Bavinck. Unfortunately, he fails to mine this rich vein sufficiently.

The same could be said for general revelation. It is Bavinck’s conviction that the God who is present to all people (via general revelation) has entered human history in Christ and in his redemptive work, thereby healing and restoring humanity to its fullness. It is the historic revelation and the reality of God’s promises as experienced in history that truly breaks through the “circularity” of faith’s knowledge and makes credible the autopistic testimony of Scripture and the Spirit. When faith is understood as informed trust in God’s promises, promises that are given in Scripture and testified to by the church’s experience of God’s grace, we are a long way from the polarities of subjectivism and objectivism and placed squarely in the middle of a narrative of promise and fulfillment.

Van den Belt’s work is a solid foundation of fine scholarship combined with deep piety that does Bavinck proud, and my concluding suggestions are given as an appreciative invitation to go a further step in our understanding and theological practice today.

—John Bolt

Hans Burger, *Being in Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008. 632 pp. \$55.00. ISBN 9781556358401.

Reviewed by Gijsbert van den Brink, Extraordinary Professor in the History of Reformed Protestantism for the Gereformeerde Bond in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands at the University of Leiden and University Professor of Systematic Theology in the Theology Faculty at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. Translated by John Bolt. The Dutch version appeared in the Vrije Universiteit journal, *Radix* 35/4 (2009): 316–19.

This book is as theological as theological can be. Its goal is to think through and account for the Christian message of salvation as the church proclaims it. This is accomplished by paying attention to an aspect of that message that often appears to be snowed under in the church, namely, the significance of Jesus Christ for believers today. Orthodox believers often close Jesus up in the past. We believe that on Golgotha he atoned for our guilt, and then we believe that the Spirit and/or we ourselves take matters over for ourselves. In liberal circles even the atoning significance of Jesus' suffering is doubted so that his unique significance for us is obscured. The New Testament declares in many places that we are "in Christ" and that "being" is a ongoing present, a "now" that points to an continuing situation or relation. But what exactly does this mean? That's what this book is all about: What does it mean when the New Testament describes Christian believers as "being in Christ"?

Now one might think that the answer to this question could be provided simply by studying the New Testament. Even though Burger considers this very important, even "decisive," he is also convinced that this answer is far too simple. We read the Bible with certain lenses that are ground by the tradition in which we stand. It is, therefore, vitally important that we become self-conscious of our own tendency to one-sidedness. Burger begins his investigation, therefore, by acknowledging what it is that his own Reformed tradition has to own up to with respect to believers' union with Christ.

Obviously no exhaustive examination would be possible, so Burger directs his attention to two key figures for whom the ongoing relationship between Christ and believers was of great importance: the Puritan John Owen and the neo-Calvinist Herman Bavinck. He does not provide a lengthy rationale for his choice, but it would seem that one good reason was the manageable amount of recent secondary literature to which he needed to attend. Nothing wrong with that. (One would love to see a similar treatment of Calvin, but the literature that one would have to wade through appears to have no end in sight.) In any case, the analysis of Owen and Bavinck provides a fair representative portrait of what classic Reformed theology did with the notion of “being in Christ.”

Burger provides a provisional balance in his fourth chapter. Apparently, there is much that is good to report: the unity of the believer with Christ is rooted in the trinitarian love of the Father for the Son in the Spirit and is expressed in warm-mystical language. At the same time there are several problematic areas. “Being in Christ” is coupled to an immediate work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer and in this way is set loose from the direct address and promise of the Gospel that comes to us in preaching. Above all, it appears that some biblical images are abstracted into theological concepts (justification, regeneration) and then function largely as corrective lenses by which the Bible is read while others (e.g., “drawn by Christ”) are downplayed. There was also a tendency to view “being in Christ” as something substantial, as a new principle of life that is infused into us. Is it not preferable to express this in relational terms from the vantage point of a direct participation of the believer in Christ?

All the more reason, therefore, in a second round, to move from out of the tradition back to Scripture. Here too Burger restricts himself to two voices, but now he truly picks the two most important: those of Paul and John. The former frequently uses the expression “in Christ,” the latter, “in me.” In a catch-basin (chapter 7.3) burger picks up the left over biblical material: the Old Testament, the synoptics, and the Petrine epistles. Apparently not all are singing from the same page. Paul and John are not saying exactly the same thing.

Paul understands “being in Christ” to refer particularly to believers spiritually participating in the history in which Jesus represents God to them. John thinks of Christ and the believer dwelling in each other. The two notions cannot simply and neatly be woven together, and Burger resists the temptation to do so. At the same time he also makes it clear that the two views are not mutually exclusive; Paul and John complement each other.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that Burger needs a number of complicated maneuvers to make this point clear. From the outset he makes use of four concepts (he also calls them “moments”) that, taken together, form a hypothesis by which all the material will be evaluated. In Burger’s judgment the systematic-theological development of the “being in Christ” concept must do justice to the ideas of representation and participation, and then beyond that, to the ideas of substitution and union.

To the degree that the general methodological approach of this work is first rate, so the more specific and detailed examination is equally cryptic and complex. The meager two pages devoted to it (26–27) call forth many questions. Why only these four concepts? The author does not provide convincing explanation for why this is the useful group. And, what really is the difference between participation and union? Why not give the four concepts equal status (as the four coordinate points of a field) rather than use substitution and union as the standard by which to test the validity of the other notions? In addition, why is “substitution” further divided into “work-substitution” and “person-substitution” with the latter term given little attention so as to suggest that there is barely any substitution therein? Fortunately, matters are clarified as we go along (though the notion of “person substitution” remains bothersome to me), but I believe the author could have utilized his analytic skills more at this point and should not have contented himself with these brief hermeneutic observations.

However this may be, Burger ends his extensive biblical-theological journey by concluding that Paul and John utilize all four ideas whenever they deal with the ongoing relation between Christ and the believer. To be sure Paul accents representation (Christ in our

place) while John emphasizes substitution (the Lamb of God who takes away our sin) and union (“we in him and he in us”). Therefore Burger could not resolve matters with the concepts of representation and participation alone; matters turned out to be more complicated than his initial hypothesis had suggested. Nonetheless, he does show that Paul is aware of substitution and union and, conversely, that John has an eye for representation and participation (e.g., the Johannine image of the vine and the branches). Though the two cannot be harmonized they are not mutually exclusive.

Following this foundational biblical-theological analysis Burger moves somewhat abruptly to the third and last round. One might think that if the biblical witness is normative and that, above all, it is not a cauldron full of contradictions, that we would now, after 400 pages, know what “being in Christ” means. Nevertheless, correctly, Burger does not put down a period. Instead he works over the biblical-theological material in some sort of overarching systematic theological vision. Good theology, after all, is more than simply an orderly compilation of biblical texts. In order to help the biblical message be understood in the thought patterns of our own day, Burger engages contemporary voices in order to present his own proposal. He considers two contemporary theologians outside of the Reformed tradition: the Lutheran Ingolf Dalferth and the Anglican Oliver O’Donovan. Thereby Burger honors the adage of Ephesians 3 that we “together with all the saints” might be able to “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.” He engages them in an exemplary manner—listening, learning, but occasionally disagreeing—in order to be able to weave all the threads together. In the last chapter Burger evenhandedly weighs the shortcomings he encounters in the tradition and in the contemporary theologians he considered and presents his own proposal as a way to overcome them.

All things considered I found this an impressive book. It is not often that someone demonstrates his mastery of the field of dogmatics in his dissertation (for the most part dogmatic theologians write dissertations on historical theological subjects). Burger knows to link the various discourses of historical theology, biblical theo-

logy, and contemporary science (i.e., ontology) in a thoughtful and creative manner. He has plowed through an enormous amount of literature and concentrated on a central theme of the faith: the communion of believers and Christ. I began this review by saying that Being in Christ was as theological as theological can be. I conclude by pointing out that the book's import and significance is as practical and community enhancing as theology can possibly be.

—Gijsbert van den Brink