

## The Witness of the Spirit in Relation to Scripture

The expression “the witness of the Spirit,” which we intend to explore in this essay, is used in Article 5 of the Belgic Confession:

We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith. We believe without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially *because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts* that they are from God, and also because they contain the evidence of this in themselves; for even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The text is from the *Book of Praise* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1984) 444. (Italics are translator’s.) See for the text authorized by the Synod of Dordrecht, 1618–1619, J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, ed., *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976) 77. The witness of the Spirit is mentioned in more confessions. In the ecclesiastical world, the most important formulation is of course to be found in the Westminster Confession of 1647: “We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an 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 infal-

The witness of the Spirit is mentioned in the section about Scripture as the means of revelation. This article concerns accepting and believing in Scripture. The decisive role is given hereby to the Spirit, because He witnesses to the fact that the books of Scripture come from God. In addition, it is pointed out that the church also has a role in helping us accept Scripture as God's Word. And further it is added that Scripture itself offers proof of its origin.

The question arises as to whether, alongside the witness of the church and the self-witness of Scripture, something else is necessary to convince us, such as the witness of the Spirit. And what is precisely the meaning of the word "witness"? Why is it said here that this witness takes place "in our hearts"?

In order to answer such questions, we will have to start with Calvin (section I). We do so because it is clear that the Belgic Confession depends here upon Calvin. Further, we want to look at the views of a number of theologians from the centuries following Calvin (section II). After this we examine possible Scripture prooftexts which have been advanced (section III). In the closing section, the issue of the theological justification of this doctrine is addressed (section IV).

## I

1. Calvin introduces the "witness of the Holy Spirit" in the *Institutes* 1.7, the chapter which deals with the authority of Scripture. According to Calvin, if it is clearly determined that Scripture is God's Word, then no one will dare to refuse to believe it (1.7.1). But who determines this? Calvin opposes the idea that the church grants Scripture its authority. He carries on a polemic here against the view of Roman Catholic theologians to the effect that the church has established and establishes the authority and extent of Scripture. Calvin counters this by saying that Scripture does not depend upon the church, but that it is the other way around: the church depends upon Scripture, referring to Ephesians 2:20 (1.7.2).

In a treatment of a quote from Augustine, Calvin describes the task of the church more precisely. Many are led to listen to Scripture by means of the church's reverence for Scripture (1.7.3). The church has thereby for

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lible truth and divine authority thereof, is *from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.*" See Ph. Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 3.602–603 (italics, trans.).

many a function which prepares and points to the recognition of the authority of Scripture. This forms the background to the phrase “not so much because the church receives and approves them as such.” Hereby, the exclusive and decisive role of the church is denied. However, “not so much” is not the same as “not.” The Belgic Confession acknowledges indirectly that the church has a preparative task with respect to our acceptance of Scripture as God’s Word.

In the *Institutes* 1.7.4 and 5, the witness of the Spirit comes in view. Calvin formulates his language in a strikingly polemical way. In discussing the witness of the Spirit, Calvin rejects all kinds of logical reasonings which have been used. Such arguments are insufficient: “If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences—that they may not be perpetually beset by the instability of doubt or vacillation, and that they may not also boggle at the smallest quibbles—we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit” (1.7.4).<sup>2</sup> It is certainly true, even with regard to learned opponents, that, unless they have been hardened to the point of hopeless impudence, “this confession will be wrested from them: that they see manifest signs of God speaking in Scripture. From this it is clear that the teaching of Scripture is from heaven” (1.7.4). But Calvin does not accept these “manifest signs” as proofs which give us certainty.

At first sight, then, it is remarkable that Calvin devotes the following chapter to a discussion of these signs. Yet this is less strange than it appears. This is so because Scripture is the Word of God and manifests the signs of that fact. “Once we have embraced it devoutly as its dignity deserves, and have recognized it to be above the common sort of things, those arguments—not strong enough before—to engraft and fix the certainty of Scripture in our minds—become very useful aids” (1.8.1). The evidences of its divinity are thus indeed present in Scripture, but according to Calvin, they cannot fully convince us. That is why the witness of the Spirit precedes these signs.

Article 5 of the Belgic Confession speaks in the same way: “...also because they [the Scriptures] contain the evidence of this in themselves.” Faith in Scripture as the Word of God is not a faith contrary to what one knows, without any grounds at all. Scripture bears the clear signs that it comes from

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<sup>2</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). The Latin text consulted was the edition of A. Tholuck, *Ioannis Calvini Institutio Christianae religionis* (Berolini: G. Eichler, 1834).

God. But the Confession does not say that this evidence is able to convince anyone. Faith in Scripture arises only through the witness of the Spirit.

In the course of this overview it has become clear to us *what* exactly the Spirit witnesses to. A. D. R. Polman writes in connection with Article 5 of the Belgic Confession that Calvin understands by the witness of the Spirit “that working of the Holy Spirit through which the eyes of our understanding are opened to the majesty of God’s Word and through which, at the same time, this Word is sealed in our opened heart.”<sup>3</sup> But this description misses the central point Calvin is making. Already at the beginning of the chapter about the authority of Scripture it is clear that Calvin is concerned to show that “the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard” (1.7.1). The church cannot convince us of that divine origin, and even less can proofs and logical reasoning do that. The Spirit alone can do it. “The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded” (1.7.4). And, summarizing, he says in 1.7.5: “Therefore, illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else’s judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty...that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men.” The witness of the Spirit convinces us therefore of the divine origin of Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

From this it appears that, according to Calvin, the Holy Spirit does not

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<sup>3</sup> A. D. R. Polman, *Onze Nederlandsche geloofsbelijdenis* (Franeker: T. Weaver, n.d.) 1.224–225.

<sup>4</sup> That the issue involved is as we describe appears also from the citations which Polman himself gives. For example, citing Zanchius: “The witness of the Spirit is that working of the Spirit through which he witnesses and convinces us, inwardly in our heart, that this is the Word of God and at the same time enlightens our understanding and demonstrates the heavenly truth and excellence of the Word, and so works, that we not only believe with assurance, but also truly recognize that it is God Who speaks in the word.” He also cites Polanus von Polansdorf: “The inward, divine witness, by which it is certain for each of us that the Holy Scripture, whom we possess, is truly divine, is the inward revelation of the Holy Spirit, who by means of his inward working teaches us so in our hearts. He powerfully convinces us, so that we believe with certainty that the Holy Scripture, which we possess in the prophetic and apostolic books, truly and undoubtedly is God’s Word” (225). Later Polman speaks himself also about the “divinity of the Holy Scripture” (235).

establish the authority of Scripture directly, but indirectly. The authority of Scripture stands or falls with the answer to the question as to whether Scripture is truly the Word of God or not. The Spirit makes us certain about this origin and works in such a way that Scripture receives its proper authority over our life.

2. Criticism has been brought against this teaching about the witness of the Spirit to the effect that the Reformation overturns its own foundation here. The Reformation seeks to base everything on Scripture, but bases its faith in Scripture on the witness of the Spirit, a word outside Scripture. In this connection, the comment of D. F. Strauss is well known. He said that the witness of the Spirit is the “Achilles heel” of the Protestant system.<sup>5</sup>

But we must reject the idea that by “the witness of the Spirit” is meant a witness outside of Scripture, directly spoken to our heart by the Holy Spirit. First of all, we would like to point to a very frequently cited passage from the *Institutes* 1.9, where Scripture is defended against the Anabaptists. “Therefore the Spirit, promised to us, has not the task of inventing new and unheard-of revelations, or of forging a new kind of doctrine, to lead us away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but of sealing our minds with that very doctrine which is commended by the gospel” (1.9.1). The Spirit does not witness to something outside the Word.

Further, we can point to the fact that Calvin uses other expressions as well for the “witness of the Spirit.” He claims that “the Spirit must penetrate our hearts in order to convince us.” Calvin shows that the Spirit is called a seal and deposit to establish the faith of the pious. And he calls the work of the Spirit “enlightening the understanding” (1.7.4). He also speaks of being “taught inwardly by the Spirit,” “sealed by the Spirit in our hearts,” and “enlightened by his power” (1.7.5). Expressions such as “sealing” and “enlightening” make clear, especially, that Calvin, by the expression “witness of the Spirit,” does not mean a voice that we can hear in our hearts.

But what exactly does he mean then? Calvin makes clear to us that he cannot express in words how this witness works. He speaks about a “hid-

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (4 vols.; 4<sup>th</sup> ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1928) 1.554, 559–560 (English translation: *Reformed Dogmatics* [4 vols.; ed. J. Bolt; trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008] 1.585, 588–589); and G. C. Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift* (2 vols.; Kampen: Kok, 1966) 1.42. (Trans. note: The English translation of this work, G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] is a very compressed version of two Dutch volumes. The further references in this article are from the Dutch edition.)

den witness” of the Spirit (1.7.4). It is something which all believers observe in themselves, but our words lag far behind in attempting a proper explanation of the subject (1.7.5). The expression “the witness of the Spirit,” which Calvin derives from 1 John 5:6, is therefore not intended as a precise description of the way in which the Spirit works.

B. B. Warfield provides us with an extensive discussion about Calvin’s view of the means which the Spirit uses. Warfield says that this expression could mean three different things: 1) a conviction by means of a direct revelation in the heart; 2) a blind conviction in the hearts of the hearers; or 3) a well-founded conviction, through which the Spirit enables human capacities to reach conviction on the basis of grounds which are presented. The first possibility is rejected by Warfield as being in conflict with what Calvin continually teaches against the Anabaptists.<sup>6</sup>

The second possibility has been universally accepted, according to Warfield. This is based on the fact that Calvin regards the proofs for the divine origin of Scripture as worthless and foolish. Warfield, however, does not agree with this view. Calvin, in Warfield’s view, is only saying that the proofs, apart from the witness of the Spirit, are absolutely insufficient. According to Warfield, Calvin means to say that when the soul is renewed to sensitivity to the divinity of Scripture, it is through the marks of its divinity that the soul is brought to an actual trust in the divinity of Scripture. Warfield supplies a number of citations from Calvin which indicate that the marks of Scripture themselves do not bring forth fruit until they are established by the witness of the Spirit. Therefore, according to Warfield, we must choose for the third option, that is, that the Spirit gives certainty by the means of the grounds present in Scripture.<sup>7</sup>

This hypothesis has much in it that is attractive. It also fits well with the way Calvin, addressing the Anabaptists, says that believers “are not unaware that the Word is the instrument by which the Lord dispenses the illumination of his Spirit to believers” (1.9.3). At the same time, it must be

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<sup>6</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (ed. S. C. Craig; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 79–84.

<sup>7</sup> Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 84–90. L. Berkhof apparently shows his agreement with this interpretation: “The Testimony of the Holy Spirit is simply the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the sinner, by which he removes the blindness of sin, so that the erstwhile blind man, who had no eyes for the sublime character of the Word of God, now clearly sees and appreciates the marks of its divine nature, and receives immediate certainty respecting the divine origin of Scripture,” *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (2nd rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 185.

said that this hypothesis cannot be proven with the citations used, all of which indicate that the marks of divinity are not accepted *before* they are established by the Spirit. For Warfield is saying that, according to Calvin, the Spirit establishes the divinity of Scripture *by means of* the marks.

In my opinion, Calvin himself furnishes the answer to this question at the beginning of the *Institutes* 1.7.4: “Thus, the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it. The prophets and apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak; nor do they dwell upon rational proofs. Rather, they bring forward God’s holy name, that by it the whole world may be brought into obedience to him.” A bit further on we read that, alongside rejecting logical arguments, this conviction must be sought in the hidden witness of the Spirit. There is therefore indeed proof from Scripture, by means of which the Spirit works certainty in the heart. But these are not the marks which are discussed in 1.8. The highest, most convincing proof is that the Biblical writers themselves say that their words are God’s words. This direct witness of theirs concerning Scripture is established by the Holy Spirit in the heart. And, after accepting this, one will be open to the many marks of Scripture’s divinity, described in 1.8.

3. Calvin’s view concerning the witness of the Spirit is mainly portrayed according to its description in the *Institutes*, chapter 1. Thus Warfield and Seakle Greijdanus devote attention, next to this chapter, only to Calvin’s exegesis of 2 Timothy 3:16.<sup>8</sup> Bavinck even accuses Calvin of making the witness of the Spirit too one-sidedly related to the authority of the Holy Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

This is remarkable, because Calvin himself says in this section of the *Institutes*: “I now refrain from saying more, since I shall have opportunity to discuss this matter elsewhere. Let us, then, know that the only true faith is that which the Spirit of God seals in our hearts” (1.7.5). Calvin comes back to the subject of the witness of the Spirit in his *Institutes*, and he mentions it often in his commentaries, as has been shown by S. P. Dee and W. Krusche.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 70ff. With regard to the view of Seakle Greijdanus, I’m making use of the article of J. Faber, “Prof. Dr. S. Greijdanus als dogmaticus,” in *Almanac van het Corpus studiosorum in Academia Campensi Fides Quaerit Intellectum* (Kampen: Ph. Zalsman, 1948) 99ff. See for this issue, 128–129.

<sup>9</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.563 (ET 1.593).

<sup>10</sup> S. P. Dee, *Het geloofsbegrip bij Calvijn* (Kampen: Kok, 1918) 136; W. Krusche,

A short overview can convince us of the wide scope of Calvin's references to the witness of the Spirit. According to Calvin, this witness gives us certainty regarding the following:

- The divine origin of Scripture (*Institutes*, 1.7.4; 2 Tim. 3:16; see also 1 John 2:27)
- The cleansing and the offer of Christ (*Institutes*, 3.1.1; 1 John 5:8)
- Redemption is for us (*Institutes*, 3.2.41)
- Adoption as children of God (*Institutes*, 3.24.1; Rom. 8:16; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13; 1 John 2:19; 3:24; James 1:25; see concerning being adopted in order to have hope of eternal salvation, 1 Cor. 2:12)
- The truth of God, whereby there is special attention to the truth regarding Christ (John 15:26; 1 Cor. 1:6; 1 John 2:27)
- The resurrection of Christ (Rom. 1:4)
- Election (Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 1:9; 1 Peter 1:1–2).
- The complete doctrine of salvation (1 Cor. 2; the doctrine of the gospel, 1 Cor. 2:11)
- All of God's promises, God's Word (2 Cor. 1:20; 5:5; Eph. 1:14; see *Institutes*, 3.2.35–37)

The Spirit provides witness therefore to God's Word itself as a whole, and to all the parts of its contents. The witness of the Spirit regarding the divine origin of Scripture applies to *one part* of the whole of the contents of faith—not less, but also not more than that.

Therefore, when Niesel writes that it is the task of the Spirit to make us sensitive to the one Word that is hidden in the words of Scripture,<sup>11</sup> his mistake is not only that he reads Calvin through Barthian glasses, and therefore creates a difference between the Word and the words of Scripture which as such does not occur in Calvin. It is clear that he also does not account for the fact that, according to Calvin, the witness of the Spirit reaches much farther than the Word in Scripture, that is, it includes the entire contents of Scripture. And he neglects the fact that, according to Calvin, the witness of the Spirit with regard to Scripture directs itself to the divine origin of Scripture.

4. Likewise, in connection with answering the question as to why, according to Calvin, the witness of the Spirit is necessary, we must oppose Nie-

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*Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957) 212.

<sup>11</sup> W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (trans. H. Knight; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 39.

sel's interpretation. He writes: "Precisely because the ultimate theme of Scripture is God's own all-quickening word which became flesh in Jesus Christ, that miracle must come to pass by which God makes the word of his witnesses as we find it in the Bible his own piercing word. Here is the miraculous operation of the Holy Ghost."<sup>12</sup> Here the necessity of the witness of the Spirit is brought back to being directed to the character of the contents of Scripture. Because Scripture is ultimately about God's Word which became flesh, a special activity of the Spirit is needed. Summarizing, according to Niesel, Christ cannot be comprehended by human beings, and that is why the witness of the Spirit is necessary.

But when we read Calvin, it is clear that the problem is not to be found in the contents of Scripture but in the reader. He says: "Yes, if we turn pure eyes and upright senses toward it [Scripture], the majesty of God will immediately come to view, subdue our bold rejection, and compel us to obey" (1.7.4). The same is clear from Calvin's exegesis of 2 Timothy 3:16: "Accordingly, we need not wonder if there are many who doubt as to the Author of Scripture; for, although the majesty of God is displayed in it, yet none but those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit have eyes to perceive what ought, indeed, to have been visible to all, and yet is visible to the elect alone."<sup>13</sup>

When Calvin speaks in general about faith, it becomes even clearer what he means by speaking of an obstacle in the hearer. "And this bare and external proof of the Word of God<sup>14</sup> should have been amply sufficient to engender faith, did not our blindness and perversity prevent it. But our mind has such an inclination to vanity that it can never cleave fast to the truth of God; and it has such a dullness that it is always blind to the light of God's truth. Accordingly, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing" (3.2.33).

It is sin which prevents human beings from seeing that which is visible. If there had been no sin, then human beings would have accepted God's Word without any problem. But sin makes humans blind. The witness of

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<sup>12</sup> Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 36–37.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, "Commentaries on the Second Epistle to Timothy," in his *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (trans. W. Pringle; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 249.

<sup>14</sup> This must be understood as meaning the proof which the Word of God gives. In the previous section, Calvin asserts that faith in the Word of God is necessary, just as the tree needs fruit (*Institutes*, 3.2.31). Calvin adds to this that the Word, although necessary, does not have its intended effect without the witness of the Spirit.

the Spirit is needed to overcome the resistance which is the result of the sin, now present in mankind, which opposes God's Word.

5. We now return to the issue of proofs for the divine character of Scripture. While Calvin maintains that he can show anyone the divine origin of Scripture, unless this person hardens himself, he regards such logical proofs as still insufficient. "But even if anyone clears God's Sacred Word from man's evil speaking, he will not at once imprint upon their hearts that certainty which piety requires" (1.7.4). There is therefore more certainty needed than the logical proofs can give. For proofs do not provide more than probabilities: "We seek no proofs, no marks of genuineness upon which our judgment may lean; but we subject our judgment and wit to it as to a thing far beyond any guesswork!" (1.7.5). Logical reasonings are fallible and can be superseded by subsequent reasonings. That degree of uncertainty does not go together with piety. Piety demands absolute certainty and cannot base itself on the result of our fallible reasoning.

What Calvin turns against appears in a completely different place in the *Institutes*.

From this, also, it is clear that faith is much higher than human understanding. And it will not be enough for the mind to be illumined by the Spirit of God unless the heart is also strengthened and supported by his power. In this matter the Schoolmen go completely astray, who in considering faith identify it with a bare and simple assent arising out of knowledge, and leave out confidence and assurance of heart (3.2.33).

This is therefore no last resource of Calvin's, as if he appeals to the witness of the Spirit because he cannot prove it. Bringing forward the witness of the Spirit goes together with the character of faith. Calvin differentiates between thinking and the heart. The heart is central. Faith dwells there, and not just in thought. That is why a conviction which only reigns in thought is much lower than the level on which faith operates. The conviction that Scripture comes from God ought to be a matter of the heart and not something which is established on the grounds of arguments which can be attacked. We can see how important this issue is for Calvin by noticing how he writes in connection with a completely different subject, that is, the certainty that we are children of God. According to the Sophists, as Calvin calls them, this certainty is no more than a reasonable guess. But according to Calvin, such a reasonable guess is no certainty at all, but goes together with uncertainty and an anxiety of the heart. Calvin then answers their question, "How

can a human being be certain of God's will?" by saying: "But this is not the certainty of human ingenuity, but the witness of the Spirit of God."<sup>15</sup> Thus also on the issue of faith in the fatherly love of God, Calvin rejects every logical reasoning. The latter provides only uncertainty. Certainty is obtained by the work of the Spirit who makes us certain.

6. Calvin always links the name of the Holy Spirit to this witness. This proceeds from the texts upon which Calvin grounds his writing on this subject, especially 1 John 5:6: "And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth" and 2 Corinthians 1:22: "[God] set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (see *Institutes*, 1.7.4). But mentioning the name of the Third Person also agrees with the way in which Calvin understood the work of the trinitarian God. When Calvin quotes from John 6:44–45: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," then he describes this somewhat further on: "Therefore...we cannot come to Christ unless we be drawn by the Spirit of God" (3.2.34). And in another place Calvin writes with an apparent reference to John 12:32: "...teachers would shout to no effect if Christ himself, inner Schoolmaster, did not by his Spirit draw to himself those given to him by the Father" (3.1.4).<sup>16</sup> Calvin adds in an elucidation that even when Scripture ascribes the work of bringing to faith to the Father or the Son, the Father and the Son do this through the Spirit. Father, Son, and Spirit each have nevertheless their own unique work, without being separated from each other (see also 1.13.18). That is why Calvin especially mentions faith, and with it the certainty of knowing the divine origin of Scripture, when treating the work of the Spirit.

7. Faith in the origin of Scripture is for Calvin a part of faith. That is why the witness of the Spirit, which opens eyes to see, belongs only to the elect. "Let us, then, know that the only true faith is that which the Spirit of God seals in our hearts...God deems worthy of singular privilege only his elect, whom he distinguishes from the human race as a whole. Indeed, what is the beginning of true doctrine but a prompt eagerness to hearken to God's voice?" (1.7.5).<sup>17</sup>

The result of this, as well, is that the believer never will be able to suf-

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<sup>15</sup> Commentary on Rom. 8:16; see also his commentary on 1 Cor. 2:12.

<sup>16</sup> It is striking that Calvin in the same paragraph also mentions the Spirit, the inner teacher. See also his exegesis of 1 Cor. 2:10.

<sup>17</sup> See also *Institutes*, 3.2.35; and Calvin's exegesis of 2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Cor. 2:12.

ficiently convince another person that Scripture comes from God. Apparently there were people who accused Calvin of this. “Some good folk are annoyed that a clear proof is not ready at hand when the impious, unpunished, murmur against God’s Word.” But Calvin rejects this counter-objection immediately: “As if the Spirit were not called both ‘seal’ and ‘guarantee’ for confirming the faith of the godly; because until he illumines their minds, they ever waver among many doubts!” (1.7.4) Calvin appeals to 2 Corinthians 1:22 in order to assert that only the Spirit can give the certainty we need.

As an illustration of the importance of this starting point, I would like to point briefly to the life work of Dr. Seakle Greijdanus. He fought for a proper conception of the witness of the Spirit, not just in the period before his professorship,<sup>18</sup> but the awareness of the witness of the Spirit permeated his work as a professor from the beginning to the end. His concluding lecture as professor supplies a clear proof of this. Greijdanus discusses here an aspect of the two-source hypothesis for the origin of the synoptic gospels. An exegesis of the beginning of Acts 6 brings him to the conclusion that the higher critical explanation is not necessary, and is even less probable than the ancient church’s view. This appears to be a technical point, but Greijdanus brings it into relation with the deepest issues of faith.

The biggest, most decisive issue, also regarding this issue, is whether faith should be attached to that which the stories in the gospels contain, or not. And the decision about this depends on, and is provided by, everyone’s deepest being, and is connected to whether one’s predisposition is to have that kind of faith or not, being made capable and led by the God himself and the working of his Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

After having pointed to the scriptural data, Greijdanus lets Calvin have the last word: “But those who wish to prove to *unbelievers* that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly, for only by *faith* can this be known” (1.8.13).<sup>20</sup>

The confession of the witness of the Holy Spirit implies the acknowledgment that unbelievers cannot be convinced by any human being of the

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<sup>18</sup> See for a summary, Faber, “Prof. Dr. S. Greijdanus als dogmaticus,” 113ff.

<sup>19</sup> S. Greijdanus, *De toestand der eerste Christelijke gemeente in zijn betekenis voor de synoptische kwestie* (with an Afterword from J. van Bruggen; Kampen: Kok, 1973) 31.

<sup>20</sup> Greijdanus, *De toestand der eerste Christelijke gemeente*, 32. The quote from Calvin is given by Greijdanus in Latin. The emphases (in italics) are his own. See also for the issue in question, the Afterword of Van Bruggen, 33ff.

truth of what God has revealed. Calvin discusses this witness in his *Institutes*, first of all, in connection with the authority of Scripture. But the rule applies finally for all things which are to be proven by the authority of Scripture.

## II

1. Of the four theologians to whom we wish to give attention in connection with our subject, *John Wesley* (1703-1791) is historically the first.

As far as I know, John Wesley spoke and wrote often about the witness of the Spirit, but he never connected it with Scripture. In his theological conceptions, it seems as if the witness of the Spirit in this sense has no place. He once published a pamphlet with the title: "A Clear and Concise Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures."<sup>21</sup> By means of reasonable arguments he believes he can sufficiently prove that Scripture is inspired. That is why he apparently does not feel any need to speak of the witness of the Spirit here. This is confirmed by a passage from a sermon about the issue of "reason, impartially considered." In it, Wesley says that reason, supported by Holy Scripture, gives us the ability to understand what Holy Scripture explains about God's being and attributes, God's interaction with his children, repentance, faith, justification, etc. But in this list Scripture itself is missing as part of the content of faith.<sup>22</sup>

John Wesley can thus be justly placed within the camp of rationalism, which, according to H. Bavinck, wanted to give the task of exploring the truth of revelation to reason, and grounded the authority of Scripture on historical proofs.<sup>23</sup>

But elsewhere, in connection with other subjects, Wesley regards the witness of the Spirit as being very important. He dedicated two of his standard sermons to this subject, deviating from his normal pattern. Both sermons have as their text Romans 8:16. And in both sermons the same definition of the witness of the Spirit is given: "The testimony of the Spirit

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<sup>21</sup> In John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (3rd ed.; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 11.484. A handy summary of Wesley's views is to be found in R. W. Burtner and R. E. Chiles, eds., *John Wesley's Theology: A Collection from his Works* (2nd ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1983). On the pamphlet, "Clear and Concise Demonstration," 19–20.

<sup>22</sup> See the sermon "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," in *Works* 6.354–355.

<sup>23</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.553–554 (ET 1.584–585).

is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.”<sup>24</sup>

Hereby we have found the first point of difference between Calvin and Wesley: Calvin uses the witness of the Spirit much more broadly than Wesley. While Wesley believes that he can prove the inspiration of Scripture convincingly with reasonable arguments, according to Calvin Scripture also belongs to the doctrines of faith to which the Spirit must give witness.

How does this witness occur according to Wesley? He says:

Meantime let it be observed, I do not mean hereby, that the Spirit of God testifies this by any outward voice; no, nor always by an inward voice, although he may do this sometimes. Neither do I suppose, that he always applies to the heart (though he often may) one or more texts of Scripture. But he so works upon the soul by his immediate influence, and by a strong, though inexplicable operation, that the stormy wind and troubled waves subside, and there is a sweet calm; the heart resting as in the arms of Jesus, and the sinner being clearly satisfied that God is reconciled, that all his ‘iniquities are forgiven, and his sins covered.’”<sup>25</sup>

It is clear where Wesley has found this description of the work of the Spirit. We find in Romans 8:16 itself no exposition of the ways in which the Spirit works as presented by Wesley in this sermon. Wesley has filled in the teaching about the witness of the Spirit from his own conversion experiences and that of others. It is instructive to read Wesley’s own description of his “Aldersgate experience.” There it becomes clear that he is convinced because believers could tell him of their experiences, whereas he did not know of any arguments from Scripture against such claims.<sup>26</sup>

The difference with Calvin becomes clear from the following quote from the *Institutes*: “Briefly, he alone is truly a believer who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, promises himself all things on the basis of his generosity; who, relying upon the promises of divine benevolence toward him, lays hold on an undoubted

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<sup>24</sup> In *Works*, 5.115, 124–125. Wesley says in his second sermon that after twenty years of reflection he still sees no need to change what he wrote (125). N.B.: A number of sermons, together with his notes on the New Testament, are indicated by Wesley as the doctrinal starting point for the Methodism which he founded.

<sup>25</sup> *Works*, 5.125.

<sup>26</sup> *Works*, 1.91ff. See also his appeal to the experience of the children of God in the second sermon about the witness of the Spirit in *Works*, 5.128.

expectation of salvation” (3.2.16). Thus, while Wesley bases the certainty of faith on the experience the believer has of the witness of the Spirit, with Calvin the certainty is based on God’s word of promise. According to Calvin, the witness of the Spirit means that God opens my eyes to this.

No long, involved discussion is needed to affirm that this issue has important consequences for the life of faith. When doubt assails the believer, Calvin will point him to the promises of God, which are firm.<sup>27</sup> Whereas if one follows Wesley, one must believe that doubt is impossible (which Wesley does not affirm), or point the doubter to the experience which he has had. The issue of the reality of one’s experience then becomes critically important.

That is why the difference between Calvin and Wesley on this point can be made clearer by an example which both of them use. Calvin answers the question: “How can we be assured that Scripture has sprung from God unless we have recourse to the decree of the church?” by answering: “It is as if someone asked: Whence will we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste” (1.7.2).

Wesley poses the question: “But how may one who has the real witness in himself distinguish it from presumption?” and answers as follows:

How, I pray, do you distinguish day from night? How do you distinguish light from darkness; or the light of a star, or glimmering taper, from the light of the noonday sun? Is there not an inherent, obvious, essential difference between the one and the other? And do you not immediately and directly perceive that difference, provided your senses are rightly disposed? In like manner, there is an inherent, essential difference between spiritual light and spiritual darkness.... And this difference also is immediately and directly perceived, if our spiritual senses are rightly disposed.<sup>28</sup>

The same image is used for another matter. Calvin wants to show by this image that revelation carries in itself its own distinguishing characteristic of its divine origin. Wesley on the other hand wants to demonstrate that the witness of the Spirit carries in the heart of the believer its own stamp of authenticity. While Calvin points to the genuineness of God’s revelation, Wesley points to the genuineness of experience.

We cannot speak further here about this deep difference regarding

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<sup>27</sup> See for example the important paragraph in *Institutes*, 3.2.17.

<sup>28</sup> The first sermon about the witness of the Spirit, *Works*, 5.121.

faith. In the framework of this article we must indeed seek to answer the question as to whether we can speak of a witness of the Spirit in connection with Scripture. Thereby the question arises as to whether we can say something more about the way in which the Spirit presents his witness.

2. Next let us look at the views of *F. Schleiermacher* (1768-1834). As far as I can determine, with Schleiermacher we miss, just as was the case with Wesley, a discussion about the witness of the Spirit in connection with the doctrine of Scripture. However, he adopts a completely different point of view with respect to Scripture, and he is thereby probably responsible for a new meaning for the term “witness of the Spirit.”

Schleiermacher opposes rationalism, which believes that reasonable proofs are sufficient to give certainty of faith in dealing with the doctrine of Scripture. That is why he begins his section on Scripture in his *The Christian Faith* with the assertion: “The authority of Holy Scripture cannot be the foundation of faith in Christ; rather must the latter be presupposed before a peculiar authority can be granted to Holy Scripture.”<sup>29</sup> Schleiermacher uses two arguments to reject the view that one can convince unbelievers of the truth of Scripture by reasonable arguments. First, not everyone is able to prove something reasonably. When one asserts that the authority of Scripture can be proven reasonably, then one is actually dividing believers into two groups. There are those who can prove it themselves, and there are those who are dependent upon others for proofs. But being dependent on another human being is in conflict with the fundamental conviction of the Reformation regarding faith. Second, Schleiermacher points out that if the proof is acceptable for people who do not have any consciousness of being redeemed, the proof is separate from repentance and conversion. This conviction can then not be called true faith.<sup>30</sup>

This criticism of Schleiermacher is a valid opposition to rationalism. That is not to say that we are therefore forced to agree with the other possibility which Schleiermacher presents us, that is, that the authority of Scripture is based on faith in Christ. There are other possibilities than the dilemmas which Schleiermacher offers us—for example, the possibility that God, in his revelation, explains both the character of his Word as well as Christ.

The starting point for Schleiermacher’s view of Scripture is that the Spirit binds together Christians from two thousand years ago with the

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<sup>29</sup> F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 1999) § 128.1.

<sup>30</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, § 128.1.

church today.<sup>31</sup> To give an overview, we present a short summary of Schleiermacher's view in four points:

- The Spirit is communicated in different gradations. That is how the canonical and apocryphal writings arose in the apostolic age. Through the leading of the Spirit, the canonical writings gained influence and the apocryphal writings were driven to the periphery.
- After the apostolic age, canonical writings could no longer be written because seeing Christ could no longer take place directly. Seeing Christ must be derived from the writings of the apostolic age.
- That gives the writings of the New Testament a unique position. Thereby the New Testament is necessary in order to find guarantees for a statement being genuinely Christian, and to distinguish a Christian statement from a non-Christian one. In order to qualify as a pure product of the Christian spirit, a statement must therefore be in agreement with the New Testament writings.
- This does not mean that all Christian thoughts must be derived from the New Testament or be present in a germinal way. This is so because, since the Spirit has been poured out, there is no age without its own, original Christian thoughts. Nor does agreement with the New Testament mean that everything in the New Testament is normative. An aside and subsidiary thoughts do not have the same normativity as the chief thought in a text.<sup>32</sup>

In this way, Schleiermacher arrives at the following description of the constitutive work of Scripture: "And the interpretation of Christian faith which validates itself in each age as having been evoked by Scripture is the development, suited to that moment, of the genuine original interpretation of Christ and his work, and constitutes the common Christian orthodoxy for that time and place."<sup>33</sup>

Every time and place has its own insight in the meaning of Christ. According to Schleiermacher, this insight is certainly connected to the New Testament and must be in harmony with the chief content of it. But it is not bound as such to the New Testament, because the Spirit leads on and develops insight.<sup>34</sup> Since the faith of the believing community is the result

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<sup>31</sup> See for Schleiermacher's view of the Old Testament, *The Christian Faith*, § 132.

<sup>32</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, § 129, worked out in §§ 130–131.

<sup>33</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, § 131.2. See the beginning of his treatment of the subject, § 129.2.

<sup>34</sup> See W. Brandt, *Der Heilige Geist und die Kirche bei Schleiermacher* (Zurich:

of the working of the Spirit, it was called the “witness of the Holy Spirit” by theologians influenced by Schleiermacher.<sup>35</sup>

In this conception, the witness of the Spirit is certainly connected to Scripture, but in such a way that the witness is the form, valid for today, of the content of faith of which the New Testament gives the foundational shape. Whereas with Calvin the witness of the Spirit is that which brings a sinful human being to accept the authority of Scripture, here the decisive authority of Scripture is replaced by the authority of the witness of the Spirit.

3. When we now turn our attention to the view of *H. Bavinck* (1854–1921), then we must say at the start that we cannot do justice to all aspects of his approach. Bavinck dedicates an entire chapter of his *Reformed Dogmatics* to this subject with the title “Faith and its Ground.” And, as Bavinck always does when he explicitly treats a subject, he has woven many threads into a many-colored pattern. We will concentrate on certain points of difference with Calvin. That is not to say that there are no agreements between them. With Bavinck, too, the point of the witness of the Spirit is the divinity of Scripture. “It is not the authenticity, nor the canonicity, nor even the inspiration, but the *divinity* of Scripture, its divine authority which is the true object of the testimony of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>36</sup> And for Bavinck as well, faith in the authority of Scripture is not to be seen as separate from faith, but forms a unity with it.<sup>37</sup>

This witness of the Spirit is, according to Bavinck, three-fold. First, there is the witness of Scripture itself, whereby Bavinck points to the distinguishing characteristics which Scripture has, and the statements which it makes about itself. Further, there is the witness which the Spirit presents in the church. Finally, Bavinck points to the witness which the Spirit presents in the heart of every believer.<sup>38</sup>

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Zwingli Verlag, 1968), who says, among other things, that the work of the Spirit in Schleiermacher does not have to do with the objectivity of faith, but with its becoming objective, stemming from the subjective, and that it does not have to do with the word itself, but rather with its inward production, 172.

<sup>35</sup> See G. Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: Banner of Truth, 1974) 402.

<sup>36</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.567 [emphasis in original]; see 565–566 (ET 1.596; see 594–595).

<sup>37</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.563ff (ET 1.593ff.), with, as has been mentioned, unjust criticism of Calvin.

<sup>38</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.567–568 (ET 1.596–597). Bavinck has

This three-fold witness occurs in Calvin too, but he does not call the first and the second the witness of the *Spirit* in Scripture and in the church. Because Bavinck calls the first and second events witnesses of the Spirit, he can make even more clear than Calvin that there is an inward unity in the work of the Spirit regarding the inspiration and the acceptance of Scripture. In line with Scripture, there is a certain legitimacy to call the first and second events a “witness,” certainly if one conceives it as a witness of the Spirit by means of the Scriptures and the church to us. One disadvantage is that the proper meaning of the witness of the Spirit, in the way that Calvin presents it, is no longer expressed terminologically.

More important is the fact that Bavinck has constructed the witness of the Spirit within a concept of a theory of knowledge whereby “objective” and “subjective” are the governing terms. “Certainly the subjective starting point is not peculiar to theology. All that is objective can be approached only from the vantage point of the subject: the ‘thing in itself’ is unknowable and does not exist for us.”<sup>39</sup> Here in the chapter about the ground of faith Bavinck is speaking completely in general terms about human knowledge. He does later point to the fact that there is no identity between our knowledge of the things in the world and the content of faith in God. But there is an analogy. This is to be seen when two points are raised: The objects of human knowledge lie in themselves; their existence can only be acknowledged, not proven. And it is the Spirit who spreads out all truth objectively for us and elevates it to certainty in our mind.<sup>40</sup>

The difference between Calvin and Bavinck can be seen clearest when we imagine mankind to be without sin, as if mankind lived in paradise. Calvin writes: “Yes, if we turn pure eyes and upright senses toward it [Scripture], the majesty of God will immediately come to view, subdue our bold rejection, and compel us to obey” (1.7.4). But Bavinck maintains: “Consequently, it is also the teaching of Scripture that objective revelation be completed in subjective illumination.... The external word does not remain outside of us, but, through faith, becomes an internal word.”<sup>41</sup>

Berkouwer treats this point in Bavinck and says that “Bavinck’s vision is

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probably taken the three-fold form of witness from Spanheim (568; ET 597).

<sup>39</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.555 (ET 1.586).

<sup>40</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.558, 557 (ET 1.588, 587).

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.69 (ET 1.92). On p. 471 (ET 506) the awareness breaks through that regeneration is needed for this. But the actual treatment of the theme is completely developed within a theory of knowledge. See especially pp. 555–560 (ET 586–590).

so structured that it cannot be derived from the problematics of a general theory of knowledge, whereby the testimony begins to show similarities to a ‘postulate.’”<sup>42</sup> He points to the difference between Bavinck’s view with that of V. Hepp, who wrote a dissertation about the general witness of the Spirit which goes out to all human beings.<sup>43</sup> It is true that there is quite a distance between the views of Bavinck and his student Hepp. However, the proof that something is not black does not demonstrate that it is white.

The epistemological character of Bavinck’s exposition about the witness of the Spirit is unmistakable. “All cognition of truth is essentially a witness that the human spirit bears to it and at bottom a witness of the Spirit of God to the Word, by whom all things are made. This witness of the human spirit to truth is the presupposition and foundation, as well as an analogy, of the testimony of the Holy Spirit.... But analogy is not identity.”<sup>44</sup> The difference is seen to touch both the “objective” as well as the “subjective” side. On the objective side is the general revelation of God in nature, next to the special revelation of God in Christ. On the subjective side it is apparent (different from the knowledge of nature) that God can only be known by God. Therefore, according to Bavinck, this knowledge must be transferred by God into our consciousness.

In this way, Bavinck has fitted his view of the witness of the Spirit structurally into his theory of knowledge. Its unique character is maintained on the basis of the assertion that, with regard to the witness of the Spirit, knowledge of God is involved, and that God can only be known by God.

4. In the case of *G. C. Berkouwer* (born in 1903), who in his first volume of *De Heilige Schrift* wrote a chapter about the “Witness of the Spirit,” it is also not difficult to point to similarities with Calvin. We will mention two. Berkouwer shows that the witness of the Spirit is broadly used by Calvin in connection with many parts of the message of Scripture, and he concurs. And, just like Calvin, he rejects a spiritualism which detaches itself from Scripture.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, 1.65.

<sup>43</sup> Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, 1.61ff.

<sup>44</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.557 (ET 1.587). See also the following quote: “The relation of the Holy Spirit’s witness in the hearts of believers to the truth of revelation in Holy Scripture is, *mutatis mutandis*, no other than that of the human spirit to the object of its knowledge,” 1.558 (ET 1.588). See also S. P. van der Walt, *De wysbegeerte van Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Potschefstroom: Pro Rege, 1953) 115ff.; and R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961) 317.

<sup>45</sup> Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, 1.71–72; see also 60.

The most striking element in the views of Berkouwer is that they circle around the “faith in Scripture.” This appears already in the opening sentence of this chapter: “The confession of the witness of the Holy Spirit in direct connection with faith in Scripture has always received much attention.” It is characteristic of this faith in Scripture, according to Berkouwer, that it has never been conceived “as an impersonal or businesslike” affair.<sup>46</sup>

It becomes evident what Berkouwer is referring to when he asserts, pointing to Bavinck, that “the confession of the testimony of the Holy Spirit, according to the New Testament, is related to the truth and the salvation in Christ, and that in *this* setting the Word of God, *the Holy Scripture, is spoken of*.”<sup>47</sup> This statement gives the strong impression that the authority of Scripture is based on the fact that in it the truth and the salvation in Christ is spoken of. Then we can understand why Berkouwer emphasizes that faith in Scripture is not an objective, businesslike affair, but personal.

We are confirmed in this interpretation when we see how Berkouwer later asserts that faith in Scripture is only possible in the “relationships of the witness of the Spirit with Christ and his salvation.”<sup>48</sup> Berkouwer gives a stern warning against an objectifying of Scripture, by which an added witness is necessary before Scripture can obtain significance. Over against this, he asserts that the witness of the Spirit points to the way of faith. “In *this* way the witness of the Spirit does not mean a ‘compensation’ over against the ‘an sich’ (the ‘thing in itself’ of abstraction!) inactive and powerless Word, but a binding—and more and more being bound—to the witness regarding Christ.”<sup>49</sup>

Berkouwer points in this way to the close connection between Scripture and its content. Because Scripture is dealing with Christ and his salvation, faith in Scripture can not be a passionless, objective, businesslike acceptance of Scripture. We find this connection between Scripture and its content with the Reformers as well. But the way in which this is brought in connection to the witness of the Spirit is different.

From the last quote from Berkouwer it is clear that, according to him, the witness of the Spirit binds itself to the witness regarding Christ. In spite of the reference to its broad use in Calvin, with Berkouwer there is not much of a broad use left. Berkouwer concentrates the witness of the

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<sup>46</sup> Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, 1.41.

<sup>47</sup> Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, 1.66.

<sup>48</sup> Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, 1.69. Berkouwer treats the biblical data about the witness of Christ and his salvation from 56ff.

<sup>49</sup> Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, 1.76.

Spirit to the focus (*scopus*) of Scripture, while Calvin brings it in relation with the variegated content of Scripture.

That is why the witness of the Spirit with regard to Scripture itself receives a completely different place in Berkouwer's theology. With Calvin, the witness of the Spirit makes the believers certain that God speaks in Scripture, while with Berkouwer, the witness is tied to Christ, to whom Scripture witnesses.

This difference can be demonstrated further by the way in which Berkouwer uses Calvin in his argument. He says at a certain point: "Therefore the Spirit does not devalue this witness, but devalues merely human reasoning, which is put in the light of the highest proof of the truth of Scripture, which is received from the Person of God himself," making reference to the *Institutes* 1.7.4.<sup>50</sup> But Calvin says this slightly differently: "Thus, the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person *speaks in it*."<sup>51</sup> Calvin does not mean that we meet the Person of God in Scripture, although he will not have had much of an objection to that assertion in itself. But Calvin is here concerned with affirming that the Scriptures are spoken by God.

While Calvin emphasizes that God himself speaks the content of Scripture, Berkouwer emphasizes that the center of Scripture is God, Christ and his redemption. That is why for Calvin the witness of the Spirit is connected to the divine origin of Scripture, whereas for Berkouwer it is bound to the witness regarding Christ.

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<sup>50</sup> Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, 1.73.

<sup>51</sup> Italics NHG. The quote in Latin: "Itaque summa Scripturae probatio passim a Dei loquentis persona sumitur." The addition "truth (of the Scripture)" is present also in the translation of Sizoo, but is lacking in the Latin text. Berkouwer points also to another phrase of *Institutes*, 1.7.1, but there also Calvin is not discussing the person of God, but his voice: "non alio iure plenam apud fideles auctoritatem obtinent, quam ubi statuunt e coelo fluxisse, acsi vivae ipsae Dei voces illic exaudirentur": The Scriptures "receive complete authority with believers by no other right than when they believe that they have come forth from heaven as if the living voices of God himself were heard coming from there."

### III

We now want to see if Calvin's view is supported by Scripture. Calvin in his *Institutes* does not provide us with extensive prooftexts from Scripture. Beside a quote from Isaiah 59:21, we only find an indirect reference to 2 Corinthians 1:22 in the *Institutes* (1.7.4). The *Westminster Confession* points to the following texts: 1 John 2:20, 27; John 16:13–14; 1 Corinthians 2:10–12; and Isaiah 59:21. We can add John 16:8–11; Romans 8:16; 1 Corinthians 2:14–15 and 1 John 5:6 as texts which can be mentioned in connection with the witness of the Spirit.

1. In *Isaiah 59:21*, the Spirit and the Word are bound together in one promise: “‘As for me, this is my covenant with them,’ says the LORD. ‘My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever,’ says the LORD.”

The term “words” must refer in the first place to what precedes verse 21, the promise of the coming of the Redeemer. God adds in the following verse that this word of promise will be continually talked about in the generations of Israel. And in this connection He also gives the Spirit. The Spirit thus rests immediately upon those who are addressed, just as they have also already received the word of promise. It is therefore not possible to think of the pouring out of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

J. H. Scheepers believes that the Spirit seals the word and actualizes it.<sup>52</sup> But in order to say this, it is not necessary to say that the Spirit is “on them.” The promise of the Spirit will go together with the promise that the people will continue to speak the word of God. Calvin asserts that the same Spirit who has spoken through the mouth of the prophets must penetrate our hearts in order to convince us that the prophets have faithfully proclaimed that which was committed to them from God (1.7.4). This is certainly possible, but the text does not say this. We can go no further than seeing that the Spirit is given in order to make possible the continual speaking of God's promise.

2. In *John 16:8-15*, the promise of the Comforter (v. 7) is explained. In

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<sup>52</sup> J. H. Scheepers, *Die gees van God en die gees van die mens in die Ou Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1960) 174, 192, 275. The view of Scheepers that here the original meaning of “breath” plays a role is to be rejected because the context does not require it.

verses 8-11, the work of the Comforter in relation to the world is further developed: "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment..." The verb used for "convict" does not mean, however, that he who is addressed will always be convicted. The same verb is also used in Matthew 18:15 about the believer who "*shows him* [his brother] *his fault*." From the following verses, it is clear that the sinner unfortunately does not listen. According to Luke 3:19, the tetrarch Herodes is "*rebuked*" by John the Baptist. In John 3:20 we read: "Everyone who does evil hates the light for fear that his deeds *will be exposed*." Again we find the same verb here, now translated by "to be exposed." Here, too, the meaning is not "to move someone inwardly to acknowledgment."<sup>53</sup> Therefore the decisive point concerning the "witness of the Spirit" is not touched in this text.

Christ's explanation of the work of the Comforter in John 16 goes further by pointing out what He will do for "you." We find here the well-known passage: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (v. 13). We will not dwell on these words now in connection with our subject. Repeatedly it has been shown that this promise is especially meant for the disciples who by the gift of the Spirit will be made competent for carrying out their task as foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20).<sup>54</sup>

3. *Romans 8:16* is translated in the NIV version: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." For us, what is important above all is the meaning of the verb "to testify with," which is used with the dative here ("with our spirit"). In the dictionaries which I have consulted, there is no mention of the dative with the meaning "to" ("to our spirit"). The translation "the Spirit testifies *to* our spirit" is thus excluded.

The verb is seen to have two meanings which are closely related. If someone appears as a witness and has given his witness, then the meaning of this verb is that a second person supports the first with a second witness. Thus we get the meaning "witness with." The second meaning occurs in a situation in which there is no previous witness. Then the meaning is

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<sup>53</sup> See F. W. Grosheide, *Het heilige evangelie volgens Johannes* (2 vols.; Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Amsterdam: Bottenburg, 1950) 2.370; more extensively in B. F. Westcott, *The gospel according to St. John* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 228. For an alternative view, C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1972) 450-451.

<sup>54</sup> C. Trimp, *Betwist schriftgezag. Een bundel opstellen over de autoriteit van de Bijbel* (Groningen: Vuurbaak, 1970) 136ff., where he refers to C. van der Waal.

“for support of someone’s words,” or “to support someone’s belief.”<sup>55</sup>

In Romans 8:15, we read of our calling out: “Abba, Father.” With this comes the speaking of the Spirit. Now since our calling out does not have the character of a witness, we must choose for the second meaning and translate in the following way: “That Spirit says in support of our spirit that we are the children of God.” The Spirit confirms the truth of what we have said.<sup>56</sup>

How the Spirit does this is not explicitly stated. But two elements must not be missed. It is apparently a confirmation which applies to all the children of God. And it is a confirmation which continues. It is not simply a moment in the past. It is therefore probable that Paul is at least thinking of the confirmation which the Spirit gives through his Word and through the continual administration of the Word. There is no mention of “in our hearts,” and “convicting” is also not meant.

4. The two passages from *1 Corinthians 2* which we want to look at must be explained within the whole context of the verses 6–16.<sup>57</sup> Looking at this section, it strikes us that there is a remarkable change of subject. In 2:1–5 Paul speaks in the first person singular (“I”) to “you”; starting at 3:1, he does this again, but in the section in between he speaks about “we,” and “you” is completely missing.

Now we can imagine that Paul, with the use of “we,” is referring to himself and the Corinthians. But in this case that is not possible. Two reasons can be pointed to. Verse 6 begins with: “We do, however, speak a

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<sup>55</sup> H. G. Liddel and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9<sup>th</sup> ed.; repr. Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 1677 (hereafter LSJ) gives as the meaning: “bear witness with or in support of another”; H. Strathmann, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.; ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; trans. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76) 4.508 (hereafter TDNT) describes its meaning as: “to bear witness with,” “to attest or confirm something as one witness along with another or several others...or, with the dat., to agree”; W. Bauer, W. A. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 778 gives the same meanings as Strathmann.

<sup>56</sup> This word is found in the New Testament only in the letter to the Romans. In 2:15 there is no dative; in 9:1 the construction is the same as that of 8:16. Here also it has nothing to do with a witness of my conscience *to* me, and even less a co-witness *with* me. The meaning is that a conscience led by the Spirit agrees with Paul and confirms his statement.

<sup>57</sup> See the important article, W. C. Kaiser, Jr., “A neglected text in bibliography discussion: 1 Corinthians 2:6–16,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1981) 301–319.

message of wisdom among the mature....” It is clear that the last expression refers to believers.<sup>58</sup> That is why Paul must mean with “we” a group other than the congregations. Subsequently, 3:1 begins with “Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual....” By these words Paul makes a connection between himself as preacher of the gospel and the “we” of 2:6–16. Therefore this section is concerned about the apostles, who have received a special place in the congregations.

This applies also to 2:10–12: “...but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.” This refers to the special revelation which the apostles have received to carry on their apostolic work. Of course, we must add immediately that the congregations, too, have received revelation. But this has come indirectly, by means of the apostles and by means of Scripture.

The conclusion for our subject must be that “to reveal” here does not refer to the work of the Holy Spirit which brings people to accept the gospel.

Verses 14–15 are within the same framework of the apostolic administration of their office: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment.” We find here a contrast between the “man without the Spirit” (*psychikos anthropos*) and the “spiritual man” (*pneumatikos anthropos*). Perhaps it may be that the first term could best be translated with the “natural man.” The word *psychikos* occurs in the New Testament with two meanings. It can refer to a “nature” which is created by God (1 Cor. 15:44) or to a “nature” which has become so through sin (James 3:15; Jude 19). In 1 Corinthians 2:14 it clearly has the latter meaning, human nature as corrupted by sin. We find in this verse the same contrast as in Jude 19.

This natural man does not accept “the things that come from the Spirit of God.” This description relates back to the revelation which the Spirit of God has given the apostles (v. 12) and which is spread by the apostles (v. 13). But the natural man regards the revelation which comes from the Spirit as “foolishness.” In saying this, Paul links his thought with what he already had remarked in chapter 1 about this foolishness (vv. 18–25), and it is abundantly clear that with the “natural man” he means those who only have a sinful nature.

That which the Spirit has revealed he cannot know, “because they are

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<sup>58</sup> It is also said that “among the mature” does not refer to the entire congregation, but to only a part of it. Because this issue is not relevant for our subject, we will not deal with it here.

spiritually discerned. But the spiritual man makes judgments about all things....” Again we must ascertain the meaning of the verb which is translated “discerned” or “make judgments.” According to the dictionaries, it means “investigate closely” or “inquire into.” But that meaning does not completely fit anywhere in the New Testament. In 14:24, it has been translated with “fathomed” [“doorgrond” in the Dutch Bible Society translation of 1951, trans.]. The word in the context must mean more than “judged.” It means “to evaluate (a result) as to its proper value.”<sup>59</sup> The same thing applies to 4:3–4. It is not feasible that Paul would not “judge” himself. But Paul does not “fathom” himself completely, either; only God can do that. We must understand the verb in 2:14–15 as having the same meaning: “to evaluate as to its proper value.” It is used here especially in contrast with “not to accept,” with the meaning thus being: “to accept something for what it is.”

In 1 Corinthians 2:14 Paul says then that the natural man calls foolishness the revelation which is given by the Spirit. He cannot accept it, because he does not know its actual character. He does not recognize this revelation as wisdom given by God, but sees it as foolishness.

In verse 15, Paul adds that the spiritual man does evaluate everything (and hereby is meant again the revelation of the Spirit). He means by the “spiritual man” the person who is ruled by the Spirit of God, in contrast to the “natural man” who is ruled by sin.

If this translation is the right one, 1 Corinthians 2:14–15 supports very clearly the thought expressed by the witness of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who brings sinful people to accept the revelation given to us as the Word of God.<sup>60</sup>

5. With an allusion to *2 Corinthians 1:22*, Calvin used the expressions “seal” and “deposit” for the Spirit. In the verses 21–22 we read: “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” At first sight, it seems that Calvin is erring when he

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<sup>59</sup> Grosheide writes in his *De eerste brief van den apostel Paulus aan de kerk te Korinthe* (Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Amsterdam: Bottenburg, 1932) 473 about this verb: “‘to judge,’ weighing the pros and cons against one another and in this way eventually coming to a decision.” “Deposit” guarantees that the Spirit is the beginning and the assurance that all of God’s promises are fulfilled.

<sup>60</sup> See also J. Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by members of the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary* (ed. N. B. Stonehouse and P. Woolley; 3rd ed.; Philadelphia: Prebyterian and Reformed, 1967) 47–48.

uses the word “seal” for the Spirit. But looking closer, it becomes clear that “seal” here is indeed used for the Spirit (see especially Eph. 1:13; 4:30).

But the idea that the Spirit convinces internally is not the meaning of these two words. A seal at that time had different functions. Here it will have had the sense of a seal as a sign of possession.<sup>61</sup> “Deposit” refers to the fact that the Spirit is the beginning of the fulfilment of God’s promises and the assurance that all God’s promises will be fulfilled.

Naturally the Spirit, when He is given to someone by God, will not be inactive in his or her life. As such, this text implies all the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. But this text does not contain a clear indication of the work of the Spirit in enabling one to accept Scripture as God’s Word.

6. In the *first letter of John*, the Spirit is mentioned many times. Is He also meant by the word “anointing,” the word that suddenly appears in 2:20 and 27? The Greek word (*chrisma*) is derived from the verb for “to anoint,” and can indicate both the act (the anointing) as well as the means (the anointing oil used).<sup>62</sup> It is used with different verbs. “You have an anointing” (v. 20); “you have received the anointing,” “the anointing remains in you,” “the anointing teaches you and has taught you” (v. 27). *Chrisma* meaning “the act of anointing” does not fit the use of these verbs here. Continually the meaning of *chrisma* here is the means, thus the “anointing oil” by which the anointing takes place. As a translation, “the anointing oil” is to be preferred to “the anointing.”

This analysis helps us answer the question as to whether the Holy Spirit is meant here. The Holy Spirit is often indicated in Scripture as that by which people are anointed (see 1 Sam. 16:14; Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18; Acts 5:58; see also 2 Cor. 1:21). The Spirit can also be spoken of when it is said that believers have or have received him, or that He teaches them.

The result of the activity of the Spirit is that they “know” (vv. 20, 27).<sup>63</sup> John is writing this against the heretics who are coming with new revelations. Believers do not need such things because they have the Spirit.

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<sup>61</sup> G. Fitzer, in *TDNT*, 7.949. See also A. N. Hendriks, *Die Here is en levend ma-akt. Schriftstudies over de Heilige Geest en zijn werk* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1984) 98ff.

<sup>62</sup> See LSJ, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Verse 20 ought not to be translated as “and you all know that” (NIV: “and all of you know the truth”). The word “that” is missing. “And” has here the meaning of supplying the reason for something. The majority text has instead of “you all know,” “you know all things.”

Does this mean that the Spirit is giving new revelations? Looking at verses 24 and 27 makes clear that this is not meant. When that which they have heard from the beginning remains in them, then they remain in the Son (v. 24). That is equivalent to verse 27; as the anointing (i.e. the Spirit) teaches them, they must remain in the Son. What they have heard from the beginning is the word of the Spirit, and the Spirit teaches that more and more. In this text, we read of the teaching which the Spirit has given and still gives, but not of the witness of the Spirit.

We do not need a lot of space to deal with 1 John 5:6: “And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.” Here, too, we must think again about the witness which the Spirit presents by means of the continual proclamation of the gospel of Christ. But that is not what Calvin meant by his “witness of the Spirit.” We must say that this text does not convey the meaning “to convince” for the “witness of the Spirit.” From verse 10 it is clear that this witness is indeed convincing, but that it does not convince all.

## IV

1. When we look back at our journey along the possible prooftexts for the witness of the Spirit with regard to Scripture, then it seems that the end result is quite meagre.

The texts John 16:14–16 and 1 Corinthians 2:10–12 do not concern all believers, but rather the apostles.

In Isaiah 59:21, the work of the Spirit is certainly mentioned in connection with the Word, but what the Spirit does is not spoken of clearly.

In John 16:8–11, Romans 8:16, 1 John 2:20, 27, and 5:6, different activities of the Spirit are mentioned (to show, to confirm, to teach, to witness), but “to convince” is not to be found there. Nevertheless, we can still say that most of these activities of the Spirit, especially those mentioned in John 16:8–11, 1 John 2:27 and 5:6, can lead to the acceptance of God’s Word. As such, these texts can form a legitimate background for Calvin’s idea about the witness of the Spirit.

In 2 Corinthians 1:21–22, the work of the Spirit in giving faith is described in a summary. If we may say that the Spirit also works the acceptance of Scripture as God’s Word, then the witness of the Spirit is present implicitly in this text.

Only in 1 Corinthians 2:14–15 do we find explicitly indicated that it is the Spirit who renews sinful human beings and brings us to the acceptance of revelation as coming from God.

2. If we would stop here, then the impression might be given that the activity of the Spirit, expressed in the term “witness of the Spirit,” is only a peripheral issue in Scripture. That is why we must emphatically say that the teaching that God grants faith is central in Scripture (see, for example: Acts 16:14; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29), and that this work is often attributed to the Holy Spirit.

In John 3:3–8, regeneration is spoken of as being “born of water and the Spirit.”

1 Corinthians 12:3 teaches that no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

In 2 Corinthians 4:13, the Holy Spirit is called “the Spirit of faith.”<sup>64</sup>

In 1 Thessalonians 1:5, it is said that the gospel preaching to the Thessalonians “came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction”; and compare verse 6: “in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” See also 1 Corinthians 2:4–5.

According to Titus 3:5, God saved us “through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

1 Peter 1:2 calls those addressed “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.”

Observing how Scripture continually speaks about this subject, there can be no objection to ascribing a convincing function to the Holy Spirit.

3. An objection could be made here that the witness of the Spirit is well-founded, but that the witness of the Spirit in relation to the origin of Scripture still remains a peripheral issue.

Our answer must be that Scripture does not only speak about God, about redemption, sanctification, the church, etc., but also about itself.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Others prefer the translation “spirit of faith” [so the NIV, trans.] and therefore do not see a reference to the Holy Spirit here. For example, F. W. Grosheide, *De tweede brief van den apostel Paulus aan de kerk te Korinthe* (Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Amsterdam: Bottenburg, 1939) 160. But the connection with the verb “to have” certainly points in the direction of the Holy Spirit. See H. Hanse, in *TDNT*, 2.820. Similarly, see the combination “full of faith and the Holy Spirit” in Acts 6:15 and 11:24.

<sup>65</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.371–372; see 538, 566–567 (ET 1.401–412; see 570, 596–597); and B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (ed. S. G. Craig; Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) 114, 208–209.

Whoever is brought by the Spirit to accept God's revelation as true also accepts that which Scripture says about its own origin.

In the Old Testament, Moses asserts that the commandments that he conveys come from God. The prophets indicate with their repeated, "thus says the LORD," him from whom they have received their words. Psalms and Proverbs come into existence by the compulsion of the Spirit of God (2 Sam. 23:1-3) and by God's wisdom (Prov. 8). That is why the New Testament, when quoting the Old, can so often say: "God says" or "the Spirit says" (Matt. 4:4; Acts 1:16; 3:18, 21; 4:25; Heb. 1:5-10; 4:3, 7; 5:5-6; 2 Peter 1:21).

As far as the New Testament is concerned, the apostles received the Holy Spirit so that they could remember well what Jesus had said (John 14:26), enabling them to write the gospels, to teach new things (John 16:13; see 1 Cor. 2:10-12), and to write their letters. That is why they call for faith in their words (for example: Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31; 1 Cor. 7:12, 14:37-38; 1 Thess. 2:13; 1 John 1:1-3; Rev. 22:18-19).

The divine origin of Scripture is a part of its message, and cannot be separated from it. Precisely here lies the absolute authority of everything which Scripture says, including the Christ and his salvation. That is why the Spirit does not just convince us concerning the Person and the work of God, concerning Christ and his redemption and our being God's children, but also concerning the fact that God is the author of Scripture (1 Cor. 2:14-15).

Over against Wesley, we want to maintain that the witness of the Spirit does relate to Scripture.

Over against the followers of Schleiermacher, we want to affirm that the Spirit does not bring us to accept a new form of the old message, but the old message itself.

Over against Bavinck, we want to say that the issue of the acceptance of the origin of Scripture as a part of faith cannot be transformed into a philosophical problem regarding a theory of knowledge.

And over against Berkouwer, we want to maintain that the witness of the Spirit is not related so much to faith in the content of Scripture; rather, this witness is related to the origin of Scripture.

4. When we say that we agree with Calvin's view concerning the "witness of the Spirit," this does not mean that we regard this expression as very apt. It cannot be denied that the term "witness" has led to much misunderstanding. The criticism that the expression implies that the Spirit, besides speaking about the content of Scripture, also speaks something more in my heart, arose due to Calvin's use of this expression, although this does not do justice

to him. And the related issue as to whether the witness has a material or formal content is also to be attributed, in general, to the word “witness.”<sup>66</sup>

The cause of the problem, in my opinion, is that Calvin chose the wrong word. He used “witness” as if “to convince” is part of its meaning. The expression is apparently borrowed from 1 John 5:6: “And it is the Spirit who testifies....” In his commentary on this verse, Calvin writes: “With this expression [John] teaches how the believers feel the power of Christ even because the Spirit of Christ makes them certain.”<sup>67</sup> However, as we have already remarked, from the context it is clear that this witness can be rejected (v. 10).

The idea which Calvin wants to bring out is that the Spirit must penetrate our hearts in order to convince us that the prophets have spoken faithfully that which was committed to them by God (*Institutes*, 1.7.4). But this idea is not as such present in the term “witness.”

That is why I would like to argue that another expression ought to be chosen instead of the “witness of the Spirit.” Perhaps the expression “the convincing” or “the conviction of the Spirit” would be the best. Thereby, on the one hand, the tie to the witness of the Spirit, biblically understood, must be maintained. That is, the conviction of the Spirit is not to be separated from the witness and the teaching of the Spirit by means of the Scriptures and the proclamation based on the Scriptures. On the other hand, the meaning must be clear to the effect that the activity so described goes further than witnessing, because the Spirit must penetrate the heart and take away the hindrances, so that the Word of God is accepted. We see this when we read about Lydia in Acts 16:14: “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”

We now return to where we started, with a discussion of Article 5 of the Belgic Confession. As is well known, this confession is connected in many points to the French Confession of 1559, for which Calvin made a first draft. In Article 4 of this draft, agreeing with Article 5 of the French and the Belgic Confessions, Calvin asserts that we acknowledge the sixty-six books of Scripture as canonical “par les tesmoignage et interieure per-

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<sup>66</sup> J. Kamphuis, *Aantekeningen bij J. A. Heyns dogmatiek* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1982) 19–20.

<sup>67</sup> The Latin text: “Hoc membro docet, quomodo vim illam Christi sentiant fideles, quia scilicet Dei spiritus eos certiores reddit” (*Joannis Calvinii in epistolas novi testamenti catholicas commentarii* [ed. A. Tholuck; Halis Saxonum, 1832] 157). We may remark here that it is not totally clear that Calvin means “to convince” with the expression “certiores reddere.”

suasion du saint esprit”<sup>68</sup> [“by the witness and the inner persuasion of the Holy Spirit,” trans.].

It would have been so much more beneficial for the clarity of this issue if, in the development of the confessions, not the first but the second term had been kept!

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<sup>68</sup> Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 76.