HOLY SPIRIT AND HOLY SCRIPTURE

Considerations Concerning the Character and Function of Scripture in the Framework of Salvation History*

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Reformed theology has always been intensely occupied with the nature and function of the Bible. This is true of Reformed theology in general and is certainly equally true of theology within the ecclesiastical-theological movement that brought about a revitalization of Calvinism. In the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck were in this respect closely associated with the Americans, Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, who in their day and situation tried to defend and develop the doctrine of Scripture. They propounded a view that has become known as the 'organic view of Scripture.'[1]

Following in the footsteps of these great leaders, we esteem reflection on Scripture as paramount. In this reflection the legacy of Kuyper and Bavinck as well as that of Hodge and Warfield was and is regularly and often mentioned. The question is asked what these men may and may not have meant. Certain interpretations of these men are subjected to criticism and other views placed over against theirs. In brief, we witness a lively reflection on the reflection, which arises from the felt need to remain in the line of the pioneers.[2] It is particularly in these discussions that we sense how much of a distinctly personal stamp this reflection often has. Their contributions are made with the realization that the issue concerns us all personally.

Indeed, no one can be strictly objective while participating in the discussion of this theme. Everyone's own experiences in connection with this theme make their impact felt when one determines to study the subject more closely. I myself cannot speak purely objectively either. In what follows I will mention aspects of the issue which have become important to me in my study in the Dutch situation. I do hope, however,

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1. *Cf.* my *Revelation and Inspiration,* Amsterdam, 1968. See for Hodge and Warfield, John C. Vander Stelt, *Philosophy and Scripture, A Study in Old Princeton and Westminster Theology*, Marlton, NJ, 1978.
2. *Cf.* R. B. Gaffin, 'Old Amsterdam and Inerrancy', *Westminster Theological Journal* 44 (1982), pp 250-289.

that within the framework of my approach, I will adduce data and perspectives that lend themselves to mutual discussion.

The title and subtitle of this essay indicate the angle from which I wish to deal with Holy Scripture. My aim is to elucidate the relationship between Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture insofar as it has a bearing on the place and function of Holy Scripture in salvation history. Some time ago Herman Ridderbos thoroughly examined the relationship between salvation history and Holy Scripture.[3] He showed clearly that the Holy Scripture is not an isolated phenomenon, but finds its origin in the setting of salvation history; furthermore, its nature and purpose is determined by that history. From that perspective, Ridderbos regularly arrives at the relationship, Spirit-Scripture. This is not surprising, for the Spirit bears and shapes salvation history.

The major focus of Ridderbos' exposition, as might be expected, is his own area of specialization, the New Testament. We shall refer to some of his conclusions pertaining to the New Testament. Similar observations can also be made with respect to the Old Testament. I shall mention a few.

First of all, however, it should be noted that the revelation concerning God's Spirit in the Old Testament does not yet exhibit the degree of clarity that is seen in certain parts of the New Testament, which contain clear pointers to the trinitarian confession. As is well known, the Hebrew concept *ruach,* besides meaning breath, also means wind and storm. Accordingly, the Old Testament conception of the Spirit is distinctly dynamic. The *ruach Yahweh* (Spirit of Yahweh) is primarily and basically the mighty power that proceeds from God. This power is directed to people, but is also operative in nature and history.[4]

Particularly significant for our purpose are the data concerning the activity of the Spirit in history. Naturally these are connected particularly to the history of Israel. It is striking that the working of the Spirit manifests itself in persons who occupy an influential role in this history.

The prophets are to be mentioned first. Their ministry and message

3. H. Ridderbos, *Heilsgeschiedenis en Heilige Schrift van het Nieuwe Testament. Het gezag van het Nieuwe Testament,* Kampen, 1955.
4. In the last two decades there has been a voluminous and still growing abundance of literature on pneumatology, including the exegetical aspects. Here I mention only a general reference to the instructive introduction of H. Berkhof, *De leer van de Heilige Geest,* Nijkerk, 1965. For this essay I derived several data from the four exegetical contributions in the valuable symposium of Cl. Heitman and H. Mühlen (Hrsg.), *Erfahrung und Theologie des Heilgen Geistes,* Hamburg-München, 1974. It concerns the following articles: H. H. Schmid, 'Ekstatische and charismatische Geistwirkungen im alten Testament,' (pp 83-100); W. Schmithals, 'Geisterfahrung als Christuserfahrung,' (pp 101-117); H. Schlier, 'Herkunft, Ankunft, und Wirkungen des Heiligen Geistes im Neuen Testament' (pp 118-130); F. Hahn, 'Das biblische Verständnis des Heilgen Geistes; Soteriologische Funktion und "Personalität" des Heiligen Geistes,' (pp 131-150).

often gave a decisive turn to the fortunes of the people. Proclaiming their oracles of judgment and grace, of admonition and consolation, the prophets did not speak on their own initiative, but on behalf of their Sender. It was the Spirit of God who drove and inspired them. In a moment we shall return to the prophets.[5]

Besides the prophets, people with a special mandate can be mentioned. We think of the leaders of the exodus and conquest, Moses (Num. 11:17, 25-29), Joshua (Num. 27:18; Deut. 34:9), the judges (Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6; 14:19; 15:14), the kings, Saul (1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:14), and David (1 Sam. 16:13). The fact that the Spirit will rest upon the Messiah-King (Isa. 11:2) and the Servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1) deserves special consideration.[6]

It is interesting that in certain passages the work of the Spirit is directly linked with the entire people and their history. The Israelites, so it is said, grieved the Holy Spirit which God sent into their midst (Isa. 63:10, 11). This was the same Holy Spirit which gave them rest (Isa. 63:14).[7] In exile the people longed for a new liberation to be performed by the Spirit. There was the expectation that the Spirit would transform the people and make them dwell safely in their own land. The Spirit was, so to speak, the sign of the glorious future (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ex. 37:14; Haggai 2:5; Zech. 4:6).[8]

Thus we see that the Spirit, operating for the most part through the leaders, dealt with the whole nation of Israel in the entire course of its fluctuating history, a history that ultimately led to the messianic age. The Holy spirit directed the history of salvation and brought it to completion.

We shall now take a closer look at how the Word, as Word of the Spirit, functions within that Spirit-guided history. To do that it is necessary to concentrate once again on the prophets. Repeatedly we read that it was the Spirit who came upon the prophets (1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 19:20, 23). It was the Spirit of God who enabled Balaam to receive and proclaim revelation (Num. 24:2-4). Particularly emphatic mention is made of the activity of the Spirit in the prophet Ezekiel (cf. Ezek. 11:5; 11:24; 37:1). In Micah also (3:8) the Spirit manifested himself as the source of the message of the prophet.[9]

5. *Cf.* in addition to Schmid (see above) also the thorough study of J. H. Scheepers, *Die Gees van God en die Gees van die mens in die Ou Testament,* Kampen, 1960, pp 131-151.
6. Scheepers, *op. cit.,* pp 151-171.
7. Scheepers, *op. cit.,* pp 277-282.
8. Scheepers, *op. cit.,* pp 173ff.
9. *Cf.* in addition to Schmid and Scheepers also B. J. Oosterhoff, *Israels Profeten,* Baarn, n.d. The authors draw attention to the fact that several, particularly pre-exilic prophets, *e.g.,* Jeremiah, do not mention the Spirit. This circumstance is variously evaluated and explained. It is, however, not a decisive argument for maintaining that the Spirit would not have played a role in the commission and equipment of these prophets.

The Spirit is not only the source from which the prophets derived the strength for their prophetic labors; he is also the source of the prophetic revelation. This important perspective is highlighted in various passages (2 Sam. 23:2; 1 Kings 22:24; Isa. 30:1; 48:16; Zech. 7:12; Neh. 9:30; 1 Chron. 12:19; 2 Chron. 15:1; 20:14; 24:20). I quote one passage, Isaiah 61:1:

> The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.

The Spirit is the One who worked in the prophet, enabling him to articulate the thoughts of Yahweh in his oracle. The Spirit is the 'mediator' of the divine message. This is succinctly stated in Zechariah 7:12, which speaks of the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by (or: in) his Spirit through the former prophets (cf. Neh. 9:30). In this way the Spirit is closely linked to the Word. That close relation is expressed in Isaiah 59:21:

> And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my Spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth of your children's children, says the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore.

The point of this passage is the promise of blessing to Israel, a promise that will remain effective; that is, will be realized (cf. Isa. 55:11). When Yahweh speaks, his breath (spirit) goes forth. The breath (spirit) of Yahweh accompanies the words, and this breath (spirit) is the living and active power which in course of time will fulfill these words.[10]

The prophets received the Word of God and then spoke it. What actually is the relationship between the spoken and the written word? The available data indicate that this question cannot be answered in a simple statement and the following considerations at the least are to be included. In the course of Israel's history there have been prophets from whom no written words have been preserved. In the case of other prophets there was a considerable interval between the proclamation and its inscripturation; moreover, not everything that was said was recorded in writing. It should also be borne in mind that certain prophecies were never proclaimed, but were intended to be read and meditated upon. Speaking and writing are thus not completely coextensive.[11] This does not alter the

10. *Cf.* for the Spirit as source of prophetic revelation, Scheepers, *op. cit.*, pp 143-151. See for Is. 59:21, Scheepers, *op. cit.*, pp 272-275; for Is. 61:1 *idem*, pp 275-277, and for Zechariah 7:12 *idem*, pp 218ff. See further for these and other passages mentioned in the index of Scheepers. For the relationship Spirit-Word the statement by Dürr is significant: 'Das Wort is gottlicher Hauch mit all seinen Eigenschaften' [The Word is divine breath with all its characteristics (in Scheepers, p. 192)].

11. *Cf.* H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4th edition, Kempen, 1928, I, p 359.

fact that writing was an integral part of prophetism and possessed the same legitimacy as speaking. The prophets demanded the same authority for the written word as for the spoken word.[12] This, too, has its own profound significance, for the purpose of the written record was to give the prophetic message a wider spread than the circle of the first hearers. Others, as well, also in later generations, had to be able to learn the message. For the correct transmission of the message, oral tradition is eventually insufficient; therefore a fixed text is required. Hence we can state that the fixing of the text and the recording of the spoken word had an 'organic' place within the history of salvation and served to promote the unfolding of that salvation history.[13]

In the New Testament these connections are even more explicit. In his study mentioned above, Herman Ridderbos has given a lucid exposition of these connections. Hence, we can be briefer here than we were with the Old Testament. The citing of a few perspectives mentioned by Ridderbos will suffice.

In Ridderbos' discussion the apostolate is rightly given a central place. It is the authoritative agency that Christ established for the proclamation and transmission of the work of salvation. For all times it serves as the source and criterion for the preaching of the gospel.[14] In the divine dispensation of salvation the apostolate has a unique significance (cf. Acts 1:22, 26). It belongs to the saving work of God (cf. Acts 10:41 and Heb. 2:2-4).[15] The Holy Spirit, who is the author of the apostolate, qualifies the apostles for their task (cf. Matt. 10:18, 20; Mark 13:11; Luke 21:13-15; Acts 1:8, and the promise of the Paraclete in John 14-16).[16] All

12. Bavinck, *op. cit.*, pp 359ff. That the prophets were also writers is demonstrated in detail by B. J. Oosterhoff, *Israels Profeten*, pp 140-156.
13. *Cf.* Bavinck, *ibid.*
14. *Op. cit.*, (see note 3). p 36.
15. *Op. cit.*, p 37.
16. *Op. cit.*, pp 38ff. The scope of this contribution compels me to restrict myself. Therefore we are unable to deal in detail with the relationship Word-Spirit in the New Testament. Only a few remarks must suffice. Schlier (see note 4) basing his view on 1 Cor. 2:10ff., characterizes the Spirit of God as the power of God's inner self-experience. In that Spirit, God also steps outside and reveals himself to people. 'In Him, in whom God experiences Himself, God lets Himself be experienced.' On the basis of a variety of passages, Schlier furthermore characterizes the Spirit as the holy and sanctifying power of God. He is that as the power who makes Jesus present in his truth, *op. cit.*, pp 118-120. This has happened and still happens in the Gospel. From 1 Cor. 2:6ff Schlier deduces that the Spirit articulates in the Gospel what has happened in God's revelation in Jesus Christ, *cf.* also Eph. 3:5. So the Gospel is fruit, form and instrument of the Spirit, who himself is God's word of Power in Jesus Christ, pp 120ff. The description 'fruit, form and instrument' is particularly to the point, and is remarkably precise in expressing the state of affairs in the New Testament. Fruit: the Spirit commissions and gives strength for the proclamation of the Gospel (*cf.*, *e.g.*, Acts 1:8). Form: the real content of the Gospel is the Spirit as the epitome of all the gifts of salvation (*cf.* John 6:63). Instrument: the Gospel is the means in the hand of the Spirit by which salvation is given. *Cf.* for the salvation mediating function of the

these indicate that the proclamation of salvation constitutes an integral part of salvation history.[17]

Ridderbos considers in detail the transmission *(paradosis)* mentioned and declared in the New Testament. This transmission was first done orally, but subsequently occurred also in written form. The fixing of the text of the transmission is the form in which the church would be bound to the word of the apostles (cf. Luke 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:1).[18] The authority of the written text of the apostolic tradition was linked with that of the Old Testament books. The New Testament writings themselves contain indications that they were to be read in the church even as the books of the Old Testament (cf. 1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3).[19] The Gospel according to John accords a special significance to 'writing' and 'written' (cf. John 20:30, 31; 21:24).[20] The divine authority of the New Testament is nowhere given a greater authority than in the Revelation of John.[21]

So far we have commented in broad outlines on the relationship between Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture, as this relationship received concrete shape in the bedding of the history of salvation. Looking at this salvation history as the setting in which the link between Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture was established, we see a wide perspective unfold before our eyes. God works in this world through his Spirit. In a special manner he is active by his Spirit in his history with his people. Within that nation God used people to proclaim his Word and record that Word in writing. In that written form, the Word of God can become a powerful factor to realize the plan of God with man and the world. Having arisen in the bosom of salvation history, in the period that follows, Scripture causes the history of God's work of salvation to move on to completion. Considering the substantive continuity of God's work before, in and after the origin of Scripture, I judge that the continuation of God's saving work can also be called salvation history, provided one keeps in mind the fundamental importance of the apostolate and the canon. For – thank God – it can be said of our time as well as other times that in the midst of much unbelief and evil – and even in contradiction to it – saving acts of

Gospel, among others, Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 4:15; 1 Pet. 1:23. Precisely because the Gospel is the word of the Spirit, it is not just information about salvation, but gives salvation; it offers participation in salvation. Luther and Calvin were unanimous in this view of the word as a means of grace, *cf.* C. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, Kampen, 1959, pp 215ff. One could say that the Word is the 'outside' of the Spirit, but that expression does not make clear enough that the Word can never be detached from the Spirit (insisting on such a separation involves denaturing the Word!). Perhaps it might be better to characterize the Word as the 'skin' or the vocal form, and also the written form of the Spirit, *cf.* the quote from Dürr in note 10.

17. *Op. cit.*, pp 39ff.
18. *Op. cit.*, pp 51ff.
19. *Op. cit.*, pp 54ff.
20. *Op. cit.*, p 55.
21. *Op. cit.*, p 57.

God do happen.

From the perspective of salvation history – first of all in its regular sense of pre-canonical history of salvation, but also as ongoing history of salvation – we can gain a better view of the manner in which God reveals his truth in Scripture to us human beings. As set forth in the much discussed report on Scriptural authority *God With Us,* this happens in a manner which can be characterized as 'relational.'[22] This characterization has received much criticism, which indicates that what it is all about needs further elucidation. It is certainly not the intention of the authors to force a specific theory concerning biblical truth upon the reader of the Bible. Nor does the report suggest that the concept "relational" would exhaust the full meaning of the biblical concept of truth.

What then is the intention? I would say that the concern is to stress that the truth of the Bible from the very beginning is directed at us. This 'For us,' *pro nobis,* aspect is not an addition, an appendix to that truth, but a structural element of that truth itself. God does not reveal himself by informing us of a set of 'divine truths.' No, he reveals himself, his 'character,' his will, in his involvement with the people with whom and to whom he speaks; he does it often through people. As we have seen, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the story of that contact between God and his people was recorded in Holy Scripture. Through that Scripture God speaks to us and wants to have contact with us. Through the story (report) of his oral contact with people of days gone by, God wants to speak and associate with us people of today. Augustine spoke very sensitively of the Bible as a letter from God and Herman Bavinck took over that description.[23] A letter often contains information about all sorts of things and people but it does that in a setting that is geared to the addressee.

The genuinely *pro nobis* nature of biblical truth contains yet another aspect. As we noted, God speaks to and with us through the record of his speaking to and with people of days gone by. Despite differences in culture, environment, etc., these people were essentially like us. Through the illumination of the Spirit we identify with people in that story and in them we recognize ourselves précisely when we discern the multifaceted relationship to God.

This explanation shows that the qualification 'relational' should not be misconstrued as 'relative' or 'subjectivistic.' For the origin of the relational truth lies in God himself, who is the subject of revelation and

22. *God With Us... On the Nature of Scriptural Authority,* Special Kerkinformatie, Number 113, February 1981, Leusden. This report evoked a great deal of written reactions. Included in these reactions is even a separate booklet of 63 pages by W. van Huyssteen and B. du Toit, *Geloof en Skrifgesag. In Analise van die Skrifgesagprobleem na aanleiding van die rapport 'God met Ons',* Pretoria, 1982. This booklet contains a fair and competent discussion of the Dutch report.
23. Bavinck, *op. cit.,* p 357. Scripture is the 'viva vox Dei, epistola Dei omnipotentis ad suam creaturam'.

the initiator of the contact between him and the people. Relational implies that we listen to and accept the promises and commandments given to the people of that time as given to us. We experience them as liberating and direction-giving for our life today.

In saying this I have at the same time sketched a particular position with respect to the question of how Scripture as the book of the Spirit functions today. Sometimes Reformed people hold that God's revelation is limited to the bygone time when Holy Scripture came into being. Scripture as it has come to us in its finished shape is then seen to be the report, the precipitate of that revelation. According to this way of thinking, we are indebted to the past for the objective entity called Holy Scripture. As regards the present, we have to make do with the subjective application of that objective Scripture. This 'application' is the work of the Holy Spirit. He appropriates to us the content of Scripture. He does that by leading us to appropriate to ourselves what is objectively given in Scripture.

In this way of thinking I fully honour certain undeniably correct elements such as the recognition of the once-for-allness of Scripture. Something has happened: the work of Christ; something has been written: Holy Scripture. In the history which God by his Spirit makes and experiences with his people on earth, the work of Christ and Scripture have the nature of something that is definite and closed, something that is and remains totally determinative. One could say that they are completed forms of the Spirit.[24] But – I emphasize that here – that 'once-for-all' does not exclude continuity. What was closed in the past is therefore not locked up in the past. In a certain manner it continues in the present. Though historically datable, it remains relevant for all times.

The Epistle to the Hebrews, which so strongly emphasizes the onceness, the *ephapax,* of the appearance of Jesus Christ and of his atoning sacrifice, says at the same time that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (13:8). The same is true of Holy Scripture. It is the deposit of the revelation in the past but at the same time it is the means of the revelation in the present. It is significant in this connection that in this same Epistle to the Hebrews a word from the Old Testament is repeatedly quoted with the introductory formula 'The Spirit says' (3:7 et al). The Spirit spoke that particular word not only in the past but also now. He takes, as it were, that ancient word again into his mouth so that it in a way becomes a new word, relevant for the present. Thus he makes it clear that this ancient word never becomes antiquated but is permanently relevant.[25]

Through, in, and in connection with Scripture, God, through his Spirit, also now wants to give himself to us. In that sense one can rightly speak of

24. In this description I go along with the Dutch theologian A. A. van Ruler.
25. *Cf.* C. Veenhof, *Het Woord Gods in den brief aan de Hebreëen,* Terneuzen, 1946.

an ongoing revelation, a *revelatio continua,* of the Spirit. The Spirit is not only the *applicator* – certainly, he wants to be that too – but also the *revealer,* the One who reveals the past *and* the present.[26]

The passages in chapters 14 - 16 of the Gospel according to John mentioned above, shed a surprising light on this ongoing revelational work of the Spirit as Christ's representative. The word of the Spirit is not a substantively new word relative to the word of Christ in the sense that it would be an essentially different word. The Spirit reannounces that once spoken and written word to church and world as a new word, as a word that can be heard and understood to be relevant for the new situation. This surprisingly new speaking of the Spirit has continuity with the word once given and does not deviate from it. At the same time, the Spirit's speaking imparts to that old word a new relevance which saves and gives direction for new times.[27]

Thus far I have dealt with the rootage of Scripture in the precanonical phase of salvation history and its functioning in the ongoing post-canonical phase. In the issues that came up for discussion we were able to discover some guiding motifs and presuppositions. We have seen that the written fixation of the divine Word may never be regarded as a more or less accidental appendix but is to be characterized as an intrinsic, 'organic' moment in God's redemptive working and speaking by his Spirit. This cuts off every form of devaluation of Scripture as Scripture. We noted, moreover, that the Scripture which came into being under the guidance of the Spirit is until the present being used by the Spirit as his instrument to realize God's saving purposes. In that connection we observed two important perspectives. In the first place we were struck by the fact that in his speaking God associates in a particular manner with man. He establishes and maintains with him a relationship which Reformed theology has for centuries characterized as a convenantal relationship.[28] Secondly, the particular relationship of history and relevance struck us. The once-for-allness in the past and the continuation in the present and future are not a competitive contrast but are related to each other and carried together by the revelational work of the Spirit.[29]

From the perspective of these observations and considerations, I am convinced it is possible to elucidate questions that have caused discussion in our own circles and beyond and still continue to do so. These questions

26. The idea of a continuing revelation was at the time launched by V. Hepp in his lectures in systematic theology at the Free University. On this point I am happy to go along with him.
27. *Cf.* my *De parakleet,* Kampen, 1977.
28. Making the idea of the covenant a theme in Reformed theology goes back to Zwingli, whose initiative was taken over and carried forward by his successor Bullinger, *cf.* U. Gäbler, *Huldrych Zwingli,* München, 1983, pp 116 and 140.
29. *Cf.* Bavinck on the relationship of revelation and history; see my study (pp 327-342) referred to in note 1 and his corresponding view on the relevant nature of inspiration, *op. cit.,* pp 436-438.

concern the origin as well as the understanding of Scripture. I think in the first place of the implications and consequences of the generally accepted 'organic' view of Scripture in our midst. One of the motifs that led to the framing of the organic conception was the desire to do greater justice to the human aspect, including the entire historical and cultural background in the origin and the character of Scripture, than was possible in the earlier mechanical view.[30] In view of the exegetical problems in Scripture, however, it was not so easy in practice to present a convincing case for this endeavour in the dogmatic reflection and in exegetical practice. Often there could be observed a tendency to detract from the humanity of Scripture in order at all costs to maintain its divine character.[31] This led to the great danger of reacting against the overemphasis on the divine and then to stress the human factor. Often, quite unawares, both sides had to pay the price for seeing the relationship between God and man as one of competition. The underlying assumption of this approach is that the work of God and that of man belong to the same category, so that what God is doing cannot be done by man, and vice versa.

In order to elucidate the relationship between God and man in the origin of Scripture, the structural relationship between inspiration and the incarnation has been appealed to for support. The effort was made to find a parallel between the unity of the divine and human nature in the person of Jesus Christ and the blending of the divine and human authors in the origin of Scripture. It proved difficult however to give a satisfactory and convincing exposition of this parallel. By way of illustration I refer to the many discussions about the servant form of Holy Scripture, an expression based on what is said in Philippians 2:7 about Jesus Christ. In these discussions it remained unclear what may and may not be regarded as belonging to that servant form. For example, there is a great difference of opinion whether the presence of historical and perhaps other errors in Scripture may or may not be regarded as an aspect of the servant form. There are some who are convinced that this is the case; there are others who are just as sure that such is not the case because it concerns the servant form of the sinless Mediator.[32] The problems concerning the servant form are indicative of the inspiration-incarnation parallel. No one can deny that there is a connection but it is much more difficult to point to structural analogies and then to use these in the understanding of the

30. I have discussed this extensively in *Revelatie en Inspiratie. Cf.* also my essay 'Honderd jaar theologie aan de Vrije Universiteit,' in *Wetenschap en Rekenschap. Een eeuw wetenschapsbeoefening en wetenschapsbeschouwing aan de Vrije Universiteit,* Kampen, 1980, pp 44-104.
31. This tendency is clearly noticeable in the publications put out by ecclesiastically Reformed writers after 1926, the year in which Geelkerken and his supporters were condemned.
32. G. C. Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift,* ii, Kampen 1967, pp 114-142.

nature of inspiration. Berkouwer asks correctly 'whether this parallelism, which is concentrated on the union of the divine and human factors, is not a kind of rationalization, not only of the mystery of Holy Scripture, but also of the person of Christ because such a "union" of factors remains far below what the church tried to express in its confession of the "personal union." '[33]

With Berkouwer I am of the opinion that a much more responsible approach is to address the unique nature of Scripture from the pneumatological perspective.[34] Taking full account of the fact that Scripture in its contents is the Spirit's witness to Christ and his salvation will also have consequences for the manner in which we try to describe the relationship between the divine and the human in Scripture. In connection with what the Dutch theologian Van Ruler has said, I would affirm that the divine and the human 'factors' in Scripture are not united in the manner in which the two natures of Christ form a union but in the way in which God and man are joined in the 'indwelling' of the Spirit. Characteristic of the christological perspective is the category of substitution; with respect to the saving work of Christ we are recipients and any type of synergism is excluded. The pneumatological perspective is different. When the Spirit dwells in a person, that person becomes a fellow-worker of God (cf., e.g., 1 Cor. 3:9). For it is typical of the Spirit that he never suppresses what is human but involves it in what he does and leads it to its full unfolding. Owing to the work of the Spirit, the biblical writers in their full humanity are *sunergoi,* fellow-workers with God, when they recorded his witness.[35] If we follow this route we are no longer in the grip of the above-mentioned competition problematic which always assumes that there must be a division of labour between God and man: 50%-50%, 99%-1% (sometimes becoming 100%-0%!) with all the possible variants. That entire competition problematic terminates, however, if we pay due regard to the fact that the Spirit sanctifies a person, makes him a follower of Jesus and so enables and commissions him to devote himself to God's service with his total humanity. Man may and must work on his own creaturely level. God works for the full 100% on his divine level and man does the same (100%) on his human level.

This fundamental insight into the human activity in the origination of Scripture, not only allowed but created and borne by the Spirit, has a variety of consequences. For example, mention can be made of the

33. *Op. cit.,* p 124.
34. *Op. cit.,* pp 126ff. *Cf.* for the critique of James Barr on the christological analogy, P. R. Wells, *James Barr and the Bible,* Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1980.
35. Ch. H. Jonker, *Theologische Praxis,* Nijkerk, 1983, pp 239ff., who, in the context of his own approach to the questions concerning inspiration and nature of Scripture, in this respect emphatically agrees with Van Ruler. For Van Ruler, see his important study on the structural differences between the christological and pneumatological point of view, *Theologisch Werk,* i, Nijkerk, 1969, pp 175-190.

diversity among the biblical writers as they not only give varying accounts of the same events and matters but also present these accounts from different perspectives. With reference to the evangelists, Herman Ridderbos speaks of the human 'elbow room' which is not removed by the God-breathed nature of Scripture. In fact, he believes that it may be better to call this the 'divine' elbow room.[36] The recognition of this variation does not entail casting doubts on the Scriptures's substantive reliability and infallibility. On the contrary, Ridderbos firmly maintains these. It does imply, however, 'that the infallibility of Scripture is in many respects different from what might be demanded by a theoretical inspiration or infallibility concept that is detached from the empirical reality of Scripture. One should also be careful in reasoning what is and what is not possible with the God-breathed character of Scripture. Here, too, the freedom of the Spirit must be respected. What we should want to do first is trace the ways of the Spirit instead of making excessively self-assured pronouncements, however well-intended.'[37] According to Ridderbos, the infallibility of Scripture should be given its theological definition in connection with the purpose of Scripture. 'That means that the reliability of Scripture is not to be understood in a formal and atomistic or purely intellectual sense but with regard to its purpose and message.'[38] The purpose of Scripture is that man will understand himself, the world, history and the future in the light of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Entirely in agreement with what we said about history, Ridderbos observes that Scripture in its entirety and in each of its parts is used by the Spirit to serve this great soteriological aim. On account of this purpose and the nature of Scripture that fits that purpose, Ridderbos judges that there is really no need for the concept of inerrancy *(feilloosheid)* alongside of infallibility *(onfeilbaarheid)*.[39]

In these considerations Ridderbos hands us a guideline that enables us to steer the right course in our own theological reflection, exegetically and systematically, and also in our own daily use of Scripture. This is a right course because it is both unambiguous and free from undue restrictions. It is unambiguous, for example, in that its starting point is that Scripture's presentation of information as historical is to be understood as such, unless the narrower or wider context should prove the opposite. It is also unambiguous in the recognition that Scripture is a

36. The term is from H. Ridderbos, *cf.* his *Het Woord, het rijk en onze verlegenheid*, Kampen, 1968, p. 67.
37. *Op. cit.*, p 68.
38. *Op. cit.*, p 62.
39. *Op. cit.*, p 75. *Cf.* in the same spirit F. H. von Meyenfeldt, *In zekere zin, Gedachten over waarheid, Bijbel, geloof en kerk*, Hilversum 1975, pp 114ff. Von Meyenfeldt strongly defends the inspiration of Scripture by the Spirit and the unity of Scripture, but he rejects the demand of inerrancy, the 'smoothing out of wrinkles and folds in the garment of the Spirit' (p 117).

basic unity. The concern of Scripture, in all its parts, is the same God, the same man, the same salvation. At the same time it is without undue restrictions because it abandons attempts to harmonize the variations among the biblical writers, and also repudiates the attempt to bring the diverse perspectives in Scripture together into one closed system.

If I were to give a brief summary of what I have said so far, I would say that the Bible demands respect and obedience as *theopneustē graphē* (Scripture), but it is wrong to treat it as *gramma,* letter, the letter of a law code, even if it is of divine origin.

This thesis with which I conclude my brief exposition of the origin of Scripture is at the same time a good starting point for a brief discussion of a number of questions pertaining to the understanding of Scripture. The greater our awareness that books of the Bible were written in far-off or remote phases of salvation history, the greater our awareness of the need for reflection on the conditions required for its proper understanding. Already concerning the translation of a passage, regardless of whether it comes from an earlier period or is contemporary, it is true that it is a 'transposition,' namely from the one lingual culture to the other. The Latin word *traducere* and its cognate terms in the modern languages are a clear indication. For our 'understanding' of the text the same holds true. The comprehension of a passage from the past – the biblical texts belong to that category – involves the transposition of that text into my situation. It is important that I listen to that text from within my context. Very often this happens unconsciously, for no one has really timeless ears and no one can listen purely historically, 'archaeologically.' But it is useful and necessary that what in the concrete situation usually happens unconsciously and intuitively be made the object of conscious reflection. In all sorts of serious investigations, both philosophical and theological, it has been shown that genuine understanding implies that within our own epistemological horizon we allow what was written then and there to penetrate our minds.[40]

There is thus a genuine understanding of such texts when we relate them to our own life including the entire social and cultural context in which we live. This rule holds true for the understanding of all texts, whatever their nature and content. Of course, the question presents itself: What precisely constitutes that uniqueness that is found in the understanding implied in the act of believing? My answer would be: Truly understanding the biblical texts means that through these texts I come in contact with the living God himself. That goes further and is deeper than what could be called 'religious congeniality.' Certainly, congeniality with

40. *Cf.* H. M. Vroom, *Naar letter en geest. Over het beroep op de Bijbel,* Kampen, 1981, pp 93-108. Basic for the analysis of the nature and conditions of understanding are the expositions of the philosopher Gadamer; cf. about him L. D. Derksen, *On Universal Hermeneutics, A study in the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (diss. Free University), Amsterdam, 1983.

the receptivity to the religious utterances of people, as these also reach us by way of the biblical writings, is very important. But true understanding goes beyond and is deeper than such congeniality. For the core of that understanding is the surprising, often shocking, and in any case always radical discovery that the text is concerned with the God who has me in mind, who wants to enter into fellowship with me and who wants to put me on his path. Ebeling likes to put it this way: We begin with explaining the text, but then suddenly it happens that the text explains us.[41]

It is precisely here that I would want to pinpoint what is unique in one's understanding by faith as this is produced by the Holy Spirit. Repeatedly and correctly it has been maintained in our own tradition that we may not hold to a deistic conception of the inspiration of Scripture. It is not so that the Holy Spirit, after having produced the Bible through human instrumentality, now leaves us unattended with that Scripture.[42] We have noted already that fortunately that is not so. For as I pointed out the illumination of the Spirit in reading the Scripture produces a 'recognition.' In his continuous revelational activity, the Spirit, as it were, 'opens' the Scripture to us and 'opens' us to the Scripture. This tremendous pneumatic event can also be described in other words: In Scripture the Spirit causes us to discover God, so that he makes a saving claim on us, and at the same time induces us to accept that claim. So the Spirit, who is the Establisher of relations par excellence, establishes the bond between God and us. In God's Word he makes us see the heart of God, whose deepest feelings and motives have become manifest in Jesus Christ.[43] It is clear that this work of the Spirit includes more than the removal of the historical distance. 'Opening me' also means that psychical (powerlessness) and existential barriers (unwillingness) are removed.

On the basis of the promise (John 14:16) and also our life experience we may believe that the Spirit is at work and continues to work in us. In the course of our life we encounter all kinds of changing situations in which we gain diverse experiences. It is wonderful that in these regularly varying situations and experiences, we may become aware of new aspects in familiar texts that earlier also 'spoke' to us. The old begins to speak to us in a new way. Though advanced in age, Scripture does not age; it remains new and will renew us (cf. Ps. 103:5). So the understanding of Scripture is never completed for the Bible is literally inexhaustible. It is a fountain from which we can always draw afresh, for it is the Word of the God who himself is new every moment.[44]

41. Vroom, *op. cit.*, p 107.
42. *Cf.* Bavinck, *op. cit.*, pp 356ff. *Cf.* also my reproduction of Bavinck's view on the relevant character of inspiration in *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, pp 436-438.
43. *Cf.* on the Spirit as the Establisher of relationships my article 'Pontifex Maximus' *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 78 (1978), pp 4-15.
44. I think here of the title of the book of Huub Oosterhuis and Piet Hoogeveen, *God is ièder ogenblik nieuw. Gesprekken met Edward Schillebeeckx*, Baarn, 1982.

In conclusion, a word about the implications which this has for the use of Scripture in ethics, the reflection on the Christian's conduct in various situations. It seems to me that all of us experience a measure of confusion and sometimes also a painful feeling of powerlessness when we reflect on this in the light of the tremendous problems with which we are confronted in political, social and personal ethics. The cause of those problems is not in the least the advance of science and technology, which makes much more of an impact on our thinking as Reformed Christians than we sometimes think. It is my conviction that little is gained by looking for and recommending commandments and prohibitions which in their literal form would seem to be applicable to certain contexts and situations. How perilous an undertaking this would be is shown by the fact that not even the most radical fundamentalist can be fully consistent in the use of this approach. Everyone makes exceptions, even the one who is not aware of it and in fact refuses to acknowledge it. In this connection it is useful to be reminded that Calvin and later Reformed theologians, particularly in their discussion of the Old Testament laws, always spoke variedly, and consciously, and distinguished carefully between what was and what was not to be regarded as permanently valid for later times, including our own. Moreover, relative to what was regarded as of abiding validity, they also offered an application that reckoned with the fulfillment of the Old Testament dispensation in Jesus Christ. Further, it was attuned to the newer situation. An example is the application of the sabbath commandment to the celebration of Sunday.[45]

Scripture is not a recipe book for ethical questions. Its significance for ethics is to be sought elsewhere. The Spirit as the great Establisher of relationships wants to unite us with Christ and our fellow human beings. The dual love commandment aims at bringing about, strengthening and fructifying that relationship. This dual love commandment is the expression of God's will and God's very being, whose love was manifested in the coming of Christ (1 John 4:7-9). That love is the great theme which is given concrete expression in the New Testament in numerous specific ethical practices. That love does not imply the

45. *Cf.* for this R. Schippers, *De gereformeerde zede,* Kampen, 1955. R. Bijlsma correctly points out that the appeal to Scripture must keep in mind three accents concerning authority, those of salvation, of history, and of the regulations. These are 'hierarchically' linked in the sense that the first has priority relative to the second and third, and that both the first and second have priority relative to the third, see R. Bijlsma, *Schriftuurlijk Schriftgezag,* Nijkerk, 1959, pp 422-431. In a summarizing statement Bijlsma writes: 'In every new time and situation the historical accent in the salvation authority of Scripture indicates in what way the specific regulations are relvant' (p 426). Bijlsma also uses the illustration of the centre with concentric circles around it. 'That centre is the divine salvation which we have in Jesus Christ. Around that salvation are found the historical events in the Bible. They pull our own history inside the glow of God's light. And in a wider circle that same centre is surrounded by commands and regulations,' (pp 430ff).

'abolition' of all kinds of commandments, for example in the Old Testament. It does, however, provide the criterion for their selection, interpretation and application. Furthermore, in the endeavour to give concrete expression to this love commandment, we may use as models the actions and conduct of our brothers and sisters of earlier times, as Scripture records their responses to the Word that came to them. It may be possible to find in those responses guidelines that can help us find our way in answering the questions with which we are confronted. Essential in finding such answers is the guidance of the Spirit. He is the One who in liaison with the biblical word can disclose to us the will of the Lord. Important in that connection are the deliberations of Christians among themselves. The Spirit also wants to use this communal counsel in his illumining, witnessing, comforting and admonishing work in our midst. Guided by the Spirit we may personally and jointly experience that in a certain situation a particular word or datum from Scripture speaks directly to us so that we can only say: Thus says the Lord![46]

I have to conclude. We are still on the way, and that is often a difficult experience. But we are not alone, left to fend for ourselves. The Spirit guides and accompanies us, also through Scripture, which as the book of the Spirit is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). The way leads to the great eschatological goal. All the activities of the Spirit are directed to that goal. Scripture also is directed to that goal. So, in our meditation and handling of Scripture let us not lose sight of that eschatological dimension articulated by Peter when he said: 'And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your heart' (2 Pet. 1:19).[47]

46. *Cf.* my *De parakleet,* pp 24ff. In the phraseology of the text I bear in mind the points of view which in the reflection on the use of and the appeal to Scripture have surfaced in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Participants in that discussion are especially H. M. Kuitert, A. Dekkor and H. M. Vroom.
47. *Cf.* the considerations of Bijlsma, *op. cit.,* pp 367-377, on Scripture in eschatological perspective. Bijlsma correctly observes that the use of Scripture must be in harmony with this eschatological perspective: 'In the application, beside the point of departure, also the point of arrival is important.' The phenomenon called Scripture 'has its roots somewhere in a historical situation and has spoken there on behalf of God... But in the ongoing work of fulfillment that phenomenon also aims at a specific situation,' (pp 376ff).