Viva Vox Dei

On the significance of the autopistia of the Scriptures for mission and Scripture Interpretations within the experimental Reformed tradition.

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Introduction (Chapter 1)

This thesis focuses on the significance of the autopistia (the self-convincing authority) of the Holy Scriptures in mission work and Hermeneutics within the experimental Reformed tradition. The reason for it is found in the rich diversity of interpretations of the Bible that exists worldwide and calls for a biblical hermeneutic allowing for this diversity.

The research was conducted with a strong sense of affinity with the experimental Reformed tradition in the churches. This Calvinistic theological tradition evolved since the seventeenth century in conformity to the decisions of the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619), and is characterized by strict obedience to the Scriptures in adherence to the ecumenical symbols and the Reformed creeds.

The central question in this research is how the Reformed view of sola Scriptura, and in particular that of the autopistia of the Scriptures, may have significance for mission and the interpretation of the Scriptures, without neglecting the connection with either the church and her creeds, or the individual reader of the Scriptures. This research is conducted with the presupposition that the autopistia can be of more importance in the (Reformed) Hermeneutics and can be useful to counter excessive appeals to the tradition of the church on the one hand, or permitting unlimited freedom of interpretation by the reader on the other hand. It is therefore my premise that the pneumatological dimension of the autopistia must be developed more extensively.

The autopistia refers to that characteristic of the Scriptures that can be described as its self-authentication to either the reader or hearer that culminates in faith (inherent authenticity leading to faith). The Scriptures are trustworthy, and should therefore be believed and obeyed in se and per se, without the approbation of an external authority such as the church or tradition.

The premise of this research serves as a starting point for the development of a prescriptive hermeneutic model that can be of assistance in reading the Scriptures. To facilitate the practical interaction with the Scriptures, various theological disciplines (systematic theology, practical theology, church and mission history, missiology) converge in this research.

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1 It is difficult to translate the Dutch term 'bevindelijk' into English accurately. The concept supporting the word 'experimental' is that the faith of a Christian is not in the head but in the heart—a faith that is put to the test in the spiritual life of a Christian. Alternatives are 'existential' and 'experiential.' The first word has philosophical overtones, and the second places too much emphasis on the experiences of the Christian. The word 'experimental,' however, refers to the Christian faith that is tried and tested in practice. Also the word 'pietistic' surfaces in this respect. Since that refers more to the practical life of the believer, this term is not used here.
This research focuses on three important and distinct variables in the hermeneutical process: the text, the reader, and the context. The term ‘text’ refers here to the text of the Bible, the canon. Secondly, we focus on the reader as one of the variables. Generally speaking, this reader is to be viewed as anyone who independently accesses the Bible with the objective of understanding the Bible and applying it to his own life. In our paradigm, ‘reader’ may refer to the traits of an individual reader as well as to of a group of readers. The third variable is denoted by the word context. The word ‘context’ here has the connotation of a framework, a frame of mind, or a tradition within which the Scriptures are received and interpreted.

Within the framework of this study, we view Hermeneutics as the theory of explanation and interpretation of texts, and then specifically the text of the Bible. If we attach the label ‘Reformed’ to this, it should be read as the Reformed approach to the explanation and interpretation of the Scriptures. The Reformed dimension will then be embedded in the premise: Hermeneutics based on the understanding of the Scriptures by theologians within the Reformed, experimental tradition.

The (Reformed) hermeneutic domain (Chapter 2)

This chapter begins with a general survey and a categorization of three elements which are important for the proposed hermeneutic: the (biblical) Text, the reader and his or her personality traits, and the context in which the Scriptures are being interpreted. We then describe what views have been espoused regarding this in the experimental Reformed tradition, and then with a specific emphasis on Reformed orthodoxy.

The Text

The experimental Reformed tradition attributes a number of essential distinctive properties to the Scriptures.

(1) The Bible has ultimate authority. It has auctoritas. The books of the Bible are deemed to be ‘Holy and Divine Writings’ (The Belgic Confession art. 4), and thus as the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, in which He speaks to mankind.

(2) Directly linked to this is the conception of the autopistia, the internal witness of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are also indispensable. They have necessitas. Apart from the Scriptures, God cannot be fully known. The canon is the only available means whereby one can become a partaker of salvation.

(3) That knowledge which is indispensable unto salvation can be clearly found in the Scriptures. By the use of simple means, one can obtain a sufficient understanding of it. The Bible has claritas or perspicuitas.

(4) Finally, the Scriptures are perfectly sufficient. Nothing needs to be added to them. All that is essential unto salvation is to be found in them: sola Scriptura. The Bible has perfectio or sufficientia.

The Reformed hermeneutical view regarding the Scriptures can be summarized by way of several practical directives for reading:

(1) The starting point for understanding the text is the literal, historical meaning of the biblical passage, derived from the unambiguous distinctives of language, style, and genre.

(2) Subsequently, wider circles are drawn. The reader will proceed from a specific passage to the chapter, from the chapter to the book, and from there to the broader context. The
connection between the text and other passages in the Bible will be affirmed, comparing Scripture with Scripture. The explanation of a given text may not contradict other passages of God's Word. Obscure portions of the Scriptures are to be illuminated by passages that are transparent.

(3) Thereafter, the explanation of the specific text must be consistent with the analogy of faith as summarized in the confessions of the church. Even though the Scriptures are the standard that transcends all standardization (norma normans), the creeds function as interpretive keys (norma normata). Any interpretation that contradicts the confession of the church must be rejected. In the final analysis, the reader will search for the spiritual essence of the text. No one may rest until he or she perceives that God is speaking through the text. The creeds can fulfill this function, for they are deemed as articulating the most essential content of the Scriptures.

Because (quia) the creeds are deemed to be a faithful rendition of the Scriptures, they are authoritative, even though they do so imperfectly (quatenus).

The reader
The ordinary reader does play a modest role in the experimental Reformed tradition. However, this tradition emphasizes the conviction that man lacks the natural ability to understand the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures. Such understanding requires regeneration and faith, as wrought by the Holy Spirit. The Bible must be read in a godly disposition.

Unrestricted private access on the one hand, and the spiritual inability to understand its meaning properly on the other hand, call for interpreters. The only true interpreter is the Holy Spirit, Who guides the ecclesiastical interpreters. Scripture-reading is therefore not a private affair. Although there is no objective standard by which the understanding of the Scriptures can be tested, their interpretation is practiced within the fellowship of believers, which determines the boundaries of such explanation. There is indeed freedom of exegesis, however, within the reading parameters established by the fellowship of believers.

Until today, the Reformed explanation of the Scriptures has not explicitly allowed for personal experiences and living conditions of the readers. The fact that every reader of the Bible approaches the Holy Scriptures with specific presuppositions, and with his own experiences and expectations, is not explicitly factored into the hermeneutical practice of experimental Reformed tradition.

Context
The Christian faith, and the interconnected classical doctrines as articulated in the Reformed Creeds, are the focal point of the Scriptures in the Reformed, experimental tradition. Both the natural condition of every creature, as well as the necessity of redemption, have universal features. The core message transcends not only the historical context of the authors of the books of the Bible, but also that of every person.

It is believed that the linguistic and cultural context in which the Word sounded in the original setting of the biblical authors, was fully relevant and applicable in their situation. Likewise, when the Word comes to us today, one should also be able to understand it in the current linguistic and cultural context. The Bible is a book in which God reveals His will in human words. This view presupposes the conviction that the actual context is relevant. However, the intervention of the Holy Spirit as the great Interpreter is needed to bridge the gap between the actual context in which the Scriptures were written, and that of the contemporary reader.
The church, as represented in the offices, oversees the correct interpretation of the Scriptures, and participates actively in explaining them through preaching and teaching. In the experimental Reformed tradition, expositors of the Scriptures that hail from other theological traditions, are also given a respectful hearing.

Chapter 2 concludes with a description of six Reformed hermeneutical parameters: (1) The sacred text is to be approached independently by the interpreter. (2) True exposition is interconnected with the analogy of the Christian faith. (3) The interpretation of the Scriptures occur within the context of the church. (4) Even though a correct reading protocol, as well as the knowledge of the Scriptures and its background, contribute to the veracity of the exposition, the implementation of the hermeneutical method as such is not sufficient. There must also be the appropriation of the text. (5) The interpretation of the Scriptures calls for instruction. (6) To arrive at a proper interpretation of the Scriptures, they must be available in a faithful translation into the reader’s own language.

In regard to Bible-reading in the 21st century, we conclude that there are strengths and weaknesses in the present context. The strengths are that (1) the Reformed hermeneutic is receptive to new interpretations; (2) there are no pre-conditions required for a fruitful use of the Scriptures; (3) the implementation of a process-oriented method of explanation of the Scriptures; (4) the insertion of the historical and current community we call church into the hermeneutical process; and (5) the availability of a core of hermeneutical principles. Weaknesses surface when considering (1) the insufficient incorporation of the complexity of the church in her views, and (2) the underestimation of the living conditions and the role of the reader in the hermeneutical process.

The Role of the Scriptures in Mission Work from the 16th until the 21st century
(Chapter 3)

In this initial historical analysis, we examine the role the Bible and the Reformed hermeneutical framework played in the approach to Reformed mission work since its inception in the 16th century; the role of the Scriptures in mission work in the broad spectrum of missionary outreach during the 20th century; and its present role in the 21st century. We will then pursue the global development of Reformed mission from the 17th to the early 20th century, and concentrate more in detail on the monumental Dutch translation, the Statenvertaling; the seminarium Indicum of Antonis Walaeus; the significance of the Bible in the missionary work of the Puritan missionary preacher John Eliot in New England; and Johan Bavinck, a Reformed missiologist who established the link between the missionary vision of Reformed orthodoxy and the 20th century. We will also examine the backgrounds and views regarding mission and the Scriptures as articulated at the first Global Mission Conference in Edinburgh held in 1910, and at its memorial in 2010 (as well as developments during the interim period), to gain a clearer perspective regarding the historical background of Reformed mission in the 21st century.

John Eliot’s method and approach in regard to the Bible is an example of opportunities and possibilities that issue forth from the Reformed view of the Scriptures. This is, however, unique in the Reformed mission history. We conclude that the position and role of the Scriptures in mission strategy and in Reformed missiology has remained underexposed. The church and her confessions were elevated in Reformed missiology at the expense of the Word
itself. Consequently, all the emphasis in mission work was placed on future ecclesiastical organization and teaching Reformed theology. If we would view Johan Bavinck as an important contemporary representative of Reformed mission, we may then conclude that also his concept of Reformed mission is deficient in regard to the Scriptures. In his method of mission, the Word should have received a prominent place because of the *autopistia*. This potential, however, remained untapped. By way of this omission, Reformed mission deviates from its origins: the experimental Reformed tradition which unambiguously confesses the concept of the *autopistia* of the Scriptures. Furthermore, we observe that mission within Reformed orthodoxy became very strongly ecclesiastical in nature. Therefore, in terms of approach and structure, it did not differ essentially from Roman Catholic mission endeavors.

At the 1910 conference in Edinburgh, the Scriptures were deemed to be foundational to missionary engagement. However, the subject of how a biblical hermeneutic functions within the context in varying cultures, how to interpret the Bible in one’s own context, or how to deal with differences of interpretation, was absent in the discussion. There were, however, requests for Bible translations. We conclude that many missionary organizations underestimated the importance of having the Scriptures available in the mother tongue, and have therefore failed in regard to translating the Bible up unto a period well into the 20th century. In the 20th century, there was a growing awareness that history, culture, politics, environment, and economic status affect how we read the Bible. Reformed mission were no exception in regard to the role attributed to the Scriptures.

During the 2010 Edinburgh conference, the focus was on local experiences. Mission organizations were at liberty to embrace various views on issues such as the proclamation of the Gospel, providing pastoral care, and pressing for social justice.

At the end of the chapter, we conclude that our research has yielded but little evidence regarding the observed strengths of a Reformed hermeneutic, such as being open to alternate interpretations, unrestricted access to the Scriptures, and a process-oriented method of explanation. The Reformed view of the Scriptures, which is inherently confident that the ordinary reader can be given the leeway to interact with the Scriptures independently and thereby discover its riches, has not been exploited structurally. When it comes to dealing with the Scriptures, it appears that in the Reformed tradition there is but one tune that is played by two violins, namely, the (Western) Reformed church and Reformed theology. The social and cultural environment of the (new) readers are variables of little significance in the interaction with and exposition of the Bible. Noteworthy is also the absence of an inquisitive attitude towards new interpretations of and commentaries on the Scriptures.

In the 20th century, the experimental Reformed missionary practice did not incorporate this paradigmal change into its view regarding the use of the Scriptures. In any case, this did not take place during dr. J.H. Bavinck’s tenure.

**The hermeneutical function of the *autopistia* (Chapter 4)**

In this chapter, we explore the theological position of the text more deeply in our conceptual framework, using the core concept of the *autopistia*. We do this in light of the effect this will have on the reader, and what this means in regard to the context. Special attention will be given to the relationship between the *autopistia* (or the Word) and the Holy Spirit. In two elaborate paragraphs, we address the *autopistia* and the pneumatological aspects of the
Scriptures. In the last paragraph, we link this to our hermeneutical triangle, and then arrive at our conclusion.

In this chapter, we observe that the concept of the *autopistia* encompasses more than merely a distinctive of the Scriptures. It functions in a broader context in which not only the text but also the reader and his context - which includes the historical and present community called church - have their proper place. By way of four distinctives, the essentials of the doctrine of the *autopistia* are summarized: (1) the *autopistia* refers to the sovereignty of the Word, (2) the *autopistia* refers to the veracity of the Word, (3) the *autopistia* refers to the Word of the Spirit and (4) the *autopistia* belongs to the Word of the church.

We observe that it is difficult to analyze the relationship between Word and Spirit. On the one hand, the Word and the Spirit coalesce. The sacred Text is the Word of the Holy Spirit, and is therefore independent, autonomous, and authoritative. On the other hand, however, there are also distinctions. The Holy Spirit is not encapsulated by the Word. In the Reformed theological tradition, the subject, that is, the reader or hearer of the Word, proves to be an essential hermeneutical link. As to the digestion of the Word in this tradition, there is much emphasis on the personal experience of, the interaction with, and the effect of the Word on the soul. The Holy Spirit, though actively working with and by means of the Word, is also considered to be active in man. It is thus presupposed that one’s own unique context and life are not without significance in this process. The emphasis is on consistency between the *testimonium externum* - the bond between Word and Spirit - and *testimonium internum* - the Spirit who works with and by means of the Word in the reader. We are to express ourselves here with three key words: the Word, the Spirit, and the reader.

We then summarize our findings in a set of propositions. (1) By claiming that the Scriptures have *autopistos*, Reformed theology professes that the Scriptures are Spirit-breathed and therefore have an inherent authority (self-authenticating). (2) The concept of the *autopistia* cannot be considered in isolation from our belief regarding the work of the Holy Spirit. The threefold work of the Spirit in the Word, the individual believer, and the communion of saints is viewed as the cornerstone of the Christian faith. The Word is inspired by the Spirit, so that the Scriptures may also be called *autopistos*. However, the Scriptures are not forcibly imposed on us. Through the power of the Spirit working in and by means of the Word, individual believers submit willingly to the content of the Word. However, the *autopistia* of the Scriptures also functions in the context of the church, being the community of believers of all times and places. (3) Though Word and Spirit are inextricably linked together, we may not simply conclude that this relationship between Word and Spirit is the only thing that matters. It is the ultimate aim of the Reformed experimental hermeneutic to find the relationship between the Word, the Spirit, and the reader. (4) The doctrine of salvation (soteriology) as expressed in the Reformed creeds, governs the testimony of the Scriptures, and simultaneously shows the interconnectedness of the message of the Old and New Testaments. The Scriptures convince the reader that salvation is to be found in Jesus Christ. The *autopistia* of the Scriptures engenders the assurance of salvation in the believer. The Christian faith therefore focusses more on Christ than on the formal authority of the Scriptures. In the acceptance of Christ, the acceptance of the Scriptures is comprehended, for Christ directs us to the written Word. (5) The fact that the Scriptures are *autopistos* means simultaneously that they are found to be trustworthy. The Bible contains a reality that is both salvific and historical. There is no disconnect between the fundamental components to be found in her and human life, and they are deemed to influence this life genuinely throughout the ages.
In the final part of this chapter, we apply the above to the hermeneutic triangle of text, reader, and context by reformulating the six parameters found in chapter 2: (1) *The speaking of the Scriptures*. Is the Word the essence of the spoken word? (2) *The principal elements of the Christian faith*. Does the explanation have a soteriological focus that can be accepted in view of the historical and actual confession of the church? (3) *The context of the church, with her cultural and situational distinctives*. Is the Bible read within the context of the church? (4) *A methodical, exegetical approach, and individual application or appropriation*. Is the paradoxical tension between an accurate reading of the text and the spiritual or existential appropriation warranted in our interaction with the Scriptures? (5) *Instruction*. Does instruction in the use of the Scriptures take place for existing and new readers of it? (6) *Bible-translation*. Are trustworthy and understandable translations of the Bible available?

At the end of this chapter, we conclude that the core concept of the *autopistia*, including its pneumatological dimension, is of fundamental value for the hermeneutical process of reading and interpreting the Bible. The *autopistia* legitimizes the hermeneutical process of connecting the text, the reader, and the context. The challenges that arise against this can vary. But whether that is tradition, the intellect of the reader, or the context, it secures the independence of the Scriptures by way of a hermeneutical process in which the text, the reader, and the context are inextricably linked. The presupposition of the *autopistia* thereby provides a hermeneutical model by which (1) the primacy of the text is confirmed, as the text is the fountain from which the Spirit draws; (2) the reader is given his proper due, because for a correct understanding of the Scriptures the Spirit is the Interpreter of the Word in the reader; and (3) the church and her reading-tradition also has its say, because it was by Word and Spirit that she was created within the context of time and place.

Based on our research, we plead for a more comprehensive definition of the *autopistia*, in which a stronger emphasis on the pneumatological dimension comes to the foreground, and is not solely focused on reader, but also includes the ecclesiastical context. Our enlarged definition reads as follows: ‘The *autopistia* is that distinctive of the Scriptures that can be described as its self-convincement, engendering faith in the reader or hearer of it. The witness of this is to be found in the historical and communal tradition of the Scriptures.’.

**Ecuadorian readers and the experimental Reformed approach (Chapter 5)**

In chapter 5 we will subject the hermeneutic triangle to a test by way of an experimental reading exercise held in Ecuador in regard to the parable of the prodigal son. We will examine the results in light of the hermeneutic approach that is presently in common use in missionary endeavors of the Reformed experimental tradition. In so doing, we will evaluate the applicability of our model for mission work.

In reading sessions conducted by us in Ecuador, six different groups, all having received but minimal instruction, meditated on the text of the prodigal son in Luke 15. Our analysis of the conversations is governed by the following four key questions derived from the context of our parameters: (1) Are you hearing the word through the Word? (2) Does the explanation have a soteriological focus that can be accepted in view of the historical and present confession of the church? (3) Is the Bible being read within the confines of the church? (4) Is the paradoxical tension between an accurate reading of the text and the spiritual or existential appropriation safeguarded by the manner in which the Scriptures are handled?
Of the four key questions discussed, the one pertaining to appropriation was most prominent. We noted that in the reading exercises no distance was to be observed between the Scriptures and the present. We observed a passionate engagement by the reader and a diversity of applications of the text. Our criticism was that no one listened to the text - not to the words themselves, not to the context, not to the relationship of the text, not to other passages of the Scriptures, nor was there a deep respect for the *sensus literalis*. The reader took considerable liberty in reading his own situation into the Scripture-passages. Critical reflection did not take place. There was no reading with discernment. The readers in these sessions did not use other written sources such as a Study-Bible, commentaries, etc. There was no indication at all that anyone consciously implemented the rules of reading.

In the interpretations made by the various groups we recognized that the context had some influence. Readers will interpret the Scriptures by, among other things, availing themselves of the knowledge imparted by their church communities. Readers will have their own sub-stratum of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, animism, etc. This sub-stratum can continue to play an important role in the interpretation of texts. Therefore, instruction in Bible-reading appears to be indispensable. We cautiously conclude that application and appropriation are also influenced by how we read and what we know of the Scriptures. Advanced readers appear to extract more from the text than beginning or untrained readers.

In the second part of the chapter, we investigate the hermeneutical method of the experimental part of the actual reformed denomination in the Netherlands. We discuss four representative publications regarding the reading of the Scriptures, and subsequently project that method on the Ecuadorian sample readings. Is this method useful for new readers within a different cultural context? What are its weak and strong points? How does this method work in a different cultural setting than that in which it originated? Which hermeneutical insights can be extracted from this method when engaging with the Ecuadorian reading samples? What implications does it have for the hermeneutic triangle text, reader, and context?

The first publication ‘Het lezen van de Bijbel’ (*Reading the Bible*) is written by J. van Bruggen, a prominent New Testament scholar and pastor in the Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt (Liberated Reformed Churches - Canadian Reformed Churches in North America). The second publication is ‘Leer ons lezen. Bijbellezen met zegen’, (*Teach us to read, Reading the Bible with Profit*), is written by W.C. Meeuse, pastor in the Protestantse Kerk Nederland (Dutch Protestant Church) and a member of the Reformed Alliance. The third publication ‘Zin en mening. Een bezinning op de uitleg van de Heilige Schrift (*Scope and meaning, reflections on the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures*)', written by A. Moerkerken, pastor and rector of the theological seminary of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten (Reformed Congregations). The fourth publication, ‘Lessen by de bron. Omgang met de Bijbel (*Drinking (or lessons) at the source. Interacting with the Bible*)’, written by secondary school teachers of religion W. van den Hoorn, L. Snoek, and Chr. J. Weststrate.

The text has the preeminence in this experimental Reformed method. The reader is given interpretational tools and a variety of rules that must be adhered to when reading. The doctrine and tradition of the church are phased into the analogy of faith, but they only play a subordinate role in explanation of the text - the ascertaining of the meaning of the text. Both the reader, as well as the manner in which application and appropriation occur, remain obscure. Most authors confess explicitly that being illuminated by and prayer to the Holy Spirit are essential.
The three cornerstones of the hermeneutic triangle - the text, the reader, and the church - are not in conflict with each other. In the hermeneutic approach, the paradoxical tension that exists between an accurate reading of the text and the spiritual, personal appropriation in the lives and circumstances of the readers is lacking. It seems as if this tension is avoided by placing the two methods of Bible reading side by side: on the one side there is the more cognitive, studious, and exegetical method, whereas on the other side there is the more meditative, spiritual method. Interaction with the Scriptures is primarily a one-way street, namely, from the reader to the text of the Bible. Though the need for critical self-examination and the seeking of guidance by the Holy Spirit are acknowledged, the reading process is to some extent egocentric. As these various methods are used, there is an intermingling of professional and lay-readers, and it does not become clear what link there is between the two.

Upon comparing the results of the Ecuadorian reading exercises with the experimental Reformed approach, we conclude that both have a strong emphasis on one of the three variables of our hermeneutical triangle. The Ecuadorian reading-groups read with their hearts, immediately merging the Scripture-passage into their own perception and experience, and pay little explicit attention to the text itself. In the reading process, the main focus is on their current situation. In the method used by experimental Reformed readers, we observe that the main focus is upon the biblical text, and then especially upon the historical context established by way of interpretation. Even though the importance of the personal application of the Scriptures is acknowledged, the question of how the passage under consideration can be relevant in one's own life is hardly addressed.

In both the Ecuadorian as well as the Reformed experimental methods, the Scriptures are in danger of being deprived of her *autopistia*. When we do not permit the Bible to function as an *independent* witness in a new context, it has in essence been silenced and subjected to the insights of the reader. In the Ecuadorian method, the prominence of the personal experience inhibit the witness of the Scriptures. In the Reformed experimental method, the reader can gradually be drawn away from the inherent witness of the Scriptures. This method can become so technical in nature, that the heart of the reader is not engaged in the process.

The fluid context, defined in our research as the conceptual and/or traditional framework in which the Scriptures are to be read and interpreted, is of no significance in the Ecuadorian reading groups. In the Reformed experimental approach, this fluidity is inherent in the reading-rule dictated by the analogy of faith. However, the manner in which the Scriptures have spoken throughout the lengthy tradition of the church, beginning with the moment that the authors actually wrote the words, is not taken into consideration in the process of explanation. In regard to the experimental Reformed tradition, this is remarkable indeed, since the traditions and creeds of the church are of explicit importance for explanation. It appears that this rule is rooted in the assumption that the reader is acquainted with this tradition and will automatically be able to apply this knowledge. That would imply that these authors are writing for specific readers, namely, the experimental Reformed readers who have access to trustworthy commentaries and are sufficiently acquainted with the confessions of the church. This immediately exposes the vulnerability of this method.

As we reflect upon our hermeneutical triangle, we conclude that overemphasizing the text itself and its exegetical significance, fails to do justice to the *autopistia* and its pneumatological dimension. The Bible text is then deprived of the opportunity to resonate in the heart of the reader. The second variable that plays a role in understanding the text is the intuition and the context of the reader. We observed how this functioned in the Ecuadorian
reading groups. The reader functions within the action radius of the autopistic Scriptures. The dialogue between the reader and the given Bibletext must be incorporated into the exegetical process. However, when the reader is viewed as being autonomous, the autopistia will be overestimated and severed from its source, the Scriptures. The third variable is the context. This can exert a correcting influence, and the resulting contrasts can also be addressed. By incorporating hermeneutical history, the reader will be confronted with anything that is strange in his explanation - something that is present in his own thinking and mental context, but is absent in his or her religious tradition.

**Text, reader and context in the 21st century (Chapter 6)**

The hermeneutic triangle rooted in the view of the Scriptures as having autopistia and distinguished by the six parameters formulated in chapter 5, will be augmented with a theoretical justification in this chapter. Following an explanation of other hermeneutical models (author, text and reader; pretexto, contexto and texto; reader, text, author plus the issue addressed in the text), we will highlight the distinct variables of our model. In doing so, we will incorporate the insights of the modern Hermeneutics, which interact especially with the paradigmal changes as to how mankind is to be viewed. In regard to each variable, three vantage points will be addressed:

*Text:* (1) an eternal Author, (2) a universal scope, (3) explanation, interpretation, and application.
*Reader:* (1) the reading method: multi-faceted reading, (2) the reading attitude: in submission to the Scriptures, (3) the cultural framework.
*Context:* (1) the church as a reading community, (2) ‘Wirkungs-und Rezeptionsgeschichte’, (3) the confessional heritage.

We conclude that given our present situation, with more than thirty percent of the world considering itself as Christian and considering the Scriptures as being normative for them, the hermeneutic model as described here, is a tool of vital importance. It is both orthodox because (1) it pleads for a traditional view regarding the Bible as being the Word of God - a Word that is autopistos in nature, (2) it allot significance to the historical context in which the Word was read and explained and at the same time is modern because (1) the reader is significant in the hermeneutical process, (2) of the cultural and conceptual elements that he or she inserts into the process, and (3) the present context in which the Bible is being read worldwide has hermeneutical relevance.

The autopistia of the Scriptures allows for a hermeneutical model in which not only the text and the historical or current context determine the interpretation, but also the reader and the context together, with a deep respect for the Word of God as having supreme authority. Inexperienced readers are not left to fend for themselves, but rather, are immersed into the reading tradition of the church, doing so without the immediate manipulation of the meaning of the text. This does not imply in any way that the historical and current ecclesiastical context ‘rule over’ the Bible, since these contexts are also subject to the authority of the Scriptures. Hermeneutical anarchy occurs when the meaning of a text is put squarely into the hands of the reader. This will result in hermeneutic totalitarianism, being the result of an interpretation that is imposed upon the context. By way of the model being offered here, biases as well as a lording over others will be avoided and opposed.
The maxim of *sola Scriptura* needs explanation when applied to Hermeneutics. Explanation is a continual interaction between the text, the reader, and the context. The text has preeminence. It is the source of the *autopistia*. Exposition is impossible, however, apart from taking the reader and the context into consideration.

**Viva Vox Dei (Chapter 7)**

In this chapter we return to the initial question and presupposition. Next, we will present three ecclesiastical and four mission-related applications of Hermeneutics, based on the *autopistia*. The chapter ends with a concluding observation.

By way of seven propositions, we will respond to what is being asked and presupposed. (1) The presupposition of the *autopistia* cannot be reduced to being applicable to the Text only, but it also applies to the reader and the context. (2) Using the *autopistia* as the basis for Hermeneutics, the Bible will have the preeminence in the hermeneutical process. (3) The Holy Spirit works with and by means of the Word in the reader. Therefore, in Hermeneutics, we must speak with three words: Word *and* Spirit *and* reader. (4) The concept of the *autopistia* legitimizes a hermeneutic of trust and confidence in the Bible regardless of cultural circumstances. (5) The *autopistia* of the Scriptures allows room for untrained readers to read the Bible fruitfully, but it does not leave them to themselves. (6) The hermeneutic triangle, as described here, legitimizes a plea for the use of our confessional heritage in reading the Bible. (7) The *autopistia* legitimizes fluidity in hermeneutical methodology to arrive at an explanation, interpretation, and application of the text.

We offer three applications for experimental Reformed readers: (1) we plead earnestly for Bible reading that is experimental and Scriptural; (2) we need to insert a moment of critical reflection during the exegetical process; (3) we must challenge other hermeneutical traditions. We ask attention for four applications to missionary practice: (1) the importance of Bible translation; (2) a single-minded focus on the Scriptures; (3) the indispensability of being trained in Hermeneutics; (4) the promotion of intercultural Bible reading.

Reflecting on this study, we conclude with a formulation of the nature of a hermeneutic based on the *autopistia* - a hermeneutic in which the pneumatological dimension is honored. It is (1) a challenging hermeneutic; (2) a public hermeneutic; (3) a hermeneutic that transcends time and location; (4) a transcendental hermeneutic; (5) a communal hermeneutic; (6) a hermeneutic functioning within parameters; and (7) an evangelistic hermeneutic.