

## FORM, WORD AND SPIRIT: THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS IN NOORDMANS'S CRITICAL NARRATIVE

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### Abstract

*This article deals with the pastoral-critical theology of the prominent Dutch theologian, Oepke Noordmans, in which the concepts 'form, Word and Spirit' play a major role. In contrast to a 'closed system', his theology can be described as a 'coherent hi-story' with a trinitarian structure. His use of notions such as 'school and church', 'absolute moment and continuity', 'cogito ergo sum and cogitur ergo sum', 'creation as accommodation', the 'dogma as grammar of the Gospel', and 'Paul comes and Peter goes', are discussed. Attention is given to his (contrasting) relation to the early and later Barth. The article culminates in discussing the relation between the crucified Christ and the Holy Spirit.*

**Key Words:** Oepke Noordmans, Trinity, Christ, Cross, Spirit

The Dutch theologian, Oepke Noordmans (1871-1956), considered by many to be one of the greatest theologians of the past century, is by and large, merely a name within Reformed circles in South Africa. One article can hardly do more but hint at the way this 'irregular theologian'<sup>1</sup> tells the story in an oeuvre that has been compared to a masterpiece of art.<sup>2</sup> Hopefully, the reader may get an inkling of his art and be persuaded to listen to his music, which has the devastating grace of God as its source and subject.

### A Trinitarian Story

A coherent 'story'<sup>3</sup> in contrast to a closed 'system'<sup>4</sup> is particularly appropriate to characterize the nature of Noordmans's theology. It is grounded in history and not in philosophy.<sup>5</sup> It re-tells the tale told by God himself in creation and history as retold in Scripture. It is *God's* story in a subjective (God tells the story) as well as an objective (it relates the Creator's history with his creation) sense, and as such it is also our (the creation's) story of sin and redemption. As the dynamic narrative of God's loving election

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<sup>1</sup> GJ Paul, *Schepping en Koninkrijk. Een studie over de theologie van Dr O Noordmans*, (Wageningen: Veenman & Zonen, 1959), 12.

<sup>2</sup> F Hasselaar, Review of GJ Paul's *Schepping en Koninkrijk* in: *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 14 (1959), 69-72.

<sup>3</sup> O Noordmans, *Verzamelde Werken (VW)* 8, (Kampen: Kok, 1980), 347: "De Godsopenbaring is een samenhangend geheel. Wel kan men daarin hoofdmomenten onderscheiden; maar die mag men niet uit elkaar rukken."

<sup>4</sup> *VW* 2, (Kampen: Kok, 1997), 183: "Er is maar één geloofsartikel. Niet omdat zij zich in een enerlei oplossen, maar omdat de dogmatiek de christelijke waarheden meer in de orde van een geschiedenis dan van een systeem moet zien." Also cf. *VW* 2, 272 on preaching as narrative theology.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *VW* 8, 239f., 256-258.

and merciful labour for (respectively, against) his creation, not the static philosophical concept but the living Word, not the letter but the Spirit, not the print but the text, has got the priority. This explains Noordmans's fondness for the meditation as form of theological communication. He suggests that his last volume of meditations, *Gestalte en Gees* (Form and Spirit), could be called a 'dogmatics in images'.<sup>6</sup>

The entire Bible can be called the revelation of 1John 4:16: *God is Love*. This (hi)story of Love has a Trinitarian structure in which the Author becomes one of, or rather *with*, the characters. God is not eternal silence for his very being is openness towards his creation. When speaking is not enough, God comes; when coming is not enough, He comforts. Noordmans agrees with G K Chesterton who compares the Trinity to an English open hearth radiating warmth and homeliness.<sup>7</sup>

Noordmans's retelling of the story is reminiscent of Dorothy Sayers' description of the dogma as a drama in which God is simultaneously the hero and the victim.<sup>8</sup> As the shortest summary of the Bible the doctrine of the Trinity tells a story of judgment and consolation that takes the form of Word and Spirit in which the Father addresses us in Christ and Christ comforts us through the Spirit.<sup>9</sup> In the coming of God's Kingdom the Word-made-flesh as the *Form (Gestalte) of God*, is the centre of the narrative.<sup>10</sup> And the centre of the centre is the cross.<sup>11</sup> Depicting the economic Trinity Noordmans uses the striking image of a swooping eagle with outstretched wings following his plummeting creation down into the deep.<sup>12</sup> Right at the centre, between the wings, we observe the downward thrust of the body (cf. Phil. 2:6-8) in the form of the suffering Servant as the concrete 'body (or form'<sup>13</sup>) of God' (*Gods Gestalte*).<sup>14</sup> As God's 'expressed image'<sup>15</sup> Christ the Saviour forms the proper substance (body) of the confession whilst Father and Spirit are like wings extending from creation to consummation. Noordmans finds this figure also in the *Apostolic Confession*, and hears its swooping sound in the hymns of Luther and the preludes of Bach: *Vom Himmel hoch da komm Ich her*, in between *Gott Vater in Ewigkeit*, and *Komm, Schöpfer-Geist*.

Towards the end the pace accelerates, speeding towards the climax of the cross. Noordmans recalls that in the short *Gospel of Mark* the word *euthus* (immediately) occurs no less than 45 times. The impatient Peter, whom he describes as the less suitable of the disciples to sit sedately on a holy chair, makes his staggering confession that Jesus is the Christ *on the way* (Mark 8:27). In the *fullness of time* the preceding centuries seem to shrink to a proclamation. When time touches eternity lasting the pace becomes impossible. Even Peter cannot keep up with the train of events but emulates the Tempter by trying to restrain Christ from the cross. The Son of Man must suffer, be rejected, killed and rise again, but Peter wants extension, duration, continuity of time in a kingdom without a cross. Consequently, Simon Peter (Rock) is promptly renamed, Simon Satan.<sup>16</sup> If it were not for the resurrection as the meaning of the cross forming one event with the coming of the Comforter as the Interpreter of Christ, God's hi-story, and ours, would end in a fiasco.

<sup>6</sup> *VW* 8, 181.

<sup>7</sup> *VW* 2, 223.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Het grootste drama dat ooit werd opgevoerd*, (Amsterdam: Vrij Nederland, n.d.).

<sup>9</sup> *VW* 2, 204.

<sup>10</sup> *VW* 2, 280.

<sup>11</sup> *VW* 8, 407.

<sup>12</sup> *VW* 2, 224

<sup>13</sup> *morphe Theou*, Phil. 2:6.

<sup>14</sup> *VW* 8, part II, 1: "Gods gestalte".

<sup>15</sup> *VW* 1, (Kok: Kampen, 1978), 162

<sup>16</sup> *VW* 8, 268-270.

### School and Church

Characteristic of his method is the way Noordmans uses contrasting notions, which are dialectically related, like *school* and *church*. The truths of the gospel do not belong to the secular sciences but in the sermon. This does not mean that the authority of the gospel has no use for academy. On the contrary, it was specifically the authority of the church as carrier of the *Good News* that restored Augustine's courage to think, the courage he had lost through his academic skepticism.<sup>17</sup> Henceforth, he was able to reason within the space provided by a truth that had laid hold of him with the liberating authority of prophets, apostles and martyrs.

Noordmans is convinced that theology deserves a place at the university. For sure, the church listens to a living Word mediating between God and his people. Nevertheless, this mediation entails meditation and even 'Pauline speculation'.<sup>18</sup> In this respect science may serve like Martha in Luke 10, while the soul itself adopts the demeanour of her sister Mary.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it is rather sad when theology succumb to the temptation to justify its position within the *universitas scientiarum* by pretending to be something else like literature, philosophy or history, in adopting a posture, which the biologists refer to as *mimicry*.<sup>20</sup>

The dogma has a critical and criteriological function. It cuts the cord between church and heresy.<sup>21</sup> It provides the grammar (*spraakregels*) for the Christian proclamation, which no speaker on behalf of God dare ignore without muddling its message into a Babylonian babble. Even Bach had a theological library.<sup>22</sup> Also his music had to listen to the grammar of the gospel, which enables us to stand in the succession of all speakers-on-God's behalf. Since it is impossible when preparing the sermon for Sunday to listen to each one individually, the dogma offers us these spokespersons' combined music. It provides the preacher on the pulpit and the leader at the youth camp, with a pocket full of promises to deliver to their listeners.<sup>23</sup>

Noordmans defines the 'dogma of the church'<sup>24</sup> as a cross-section of a sermon in the process of converting a sinner or ... a portrayal of the Holy Spirit caught red-handed in the act of consoling a soul. The dogma itself is neither preached nor the object of our faith. Actually, the dogma is the only thing that may sleep during the sermon. Especially, the doctrine of the two-natures may sleep soundly.<sup>25</sup> The dogma only stirs from its slumber when the minister is in danger of dozing off.<sup>26</sup>

### The Philosopher's Dream of Continuity

Noordmans describes the craving for continuity as the 'Jeroboam sin' of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> It prefers the unbroken phosphorescent line drawn by reason allowing no gaps for the Word that addresses us from above.

In a lecture, 'The problem of continuity within the dialectical theology' (1935),

<sup>17</sup> *VW 3*, (Kok: Kampen, 1981), 129f.

<sup>18</sup> *VW 3*, 399. Cf. A van der Kooi, *Het Heilige en de Heilige Geest bij Noordmans*, (Kampen: Kok, 1992), 102f.

<sup>19</sup> *VW 2*, 218.

<sup>20</sup> *VW 4*, (Kampen: Kok, 1988), 13; *VW 2*, 198.

<sup>21</sup> *VW 2*, 173.

<sup>22</sup> *VW 2*, 219.

<sup>23</sup> *VW 2*, 222.

<sup>24</sup> *VW 2*, 181.

<sup>25</sup> *VW 2*, 276.

<sup>26</sup> *VW 2*, 220. This is an allusion to Horatius, *Ad Pisones* 359: *Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*.

<sup>27</sup> *VW 3*, 693. Cf. *VW 3*, 639.

Noordmans makes mention of Kierkegaard's statement that all reasoning starts with a leap, and then focuses on René Descartes' superhuman effort to try and stop this infuriating practice and force our thinking to toe the line.

Take for instance the classic Aristotelian syllogism consisting of a major premise, a minor premise and a conclusion. Major: *All human beings are mortal*. Minor: *Socrates is a human being*. Conclusion: *Socrates is mortal*.

*All human beings are mortal?* How do you know? There are still millions of human beings around, and, maybe, many more millions to come. Yet, you jump to the conclusion that all human beings are mortal. The minor claims that *Socrates is a human being*. Are you sure you know the difference between Adam and an ape, between Socrates and a chimp? Have you fathomed the mystery of humanity and know enough about Socrates to conclude that he qualifies for a human being? Noordmans shares Schopenhauer's conviction that the syllogism is a scaly (*achterbakse, hinterlistiges*) character.

Granting both premises, the question still remains whether our childlike trust in our logical faculty is warranted. The word *mortal* appears in the major, disappears in the minor, and reappears in the conclusion. It has, so to speak, jumped from the major to the conclusion. We did not see this leap (of faith), so how can we be certain that we have not been deceived? It might turn out to be a *saltus mortale*, a fatal leap: It costs Socrates his life! Noordmans labels this hopping, skipping and jumping of reason, a 'logical dance'.

Descartes intended to stop this revelry by starting from one rock-solid truth building up an all-embracing science *per continuum et nullibi interruptum cogitationis motum* (through a continuous and uninterrupted movement of thought). What could be the driving force behind this dream? One possibility is the active continuity of function; another, the passive all-encompassing neo-platonic continuity of being including God, spirit, soul and matter. Noordmans sees Spinoza and Schleiermacher as exponents of both active and passive continuity. Little room remains for the qualitative difference between Creator and creation, nature and Spirit, good and evil, faith and unbelief. These contrasts are reduced to quantitative differences of degree. The cosmic tensions described in the creation narrative and experienced in real life, are diminished to merely subjective modifications of conditions in the soul.

Against this form of continuity where no room is left for God's Word, his judgment, his opinion, his promise, dialectical theology, Noordmans included, launches its assault. Descartes is stood on his head. Not *cogito ergo sum*, but as Gunning, following Von Baader, puts it: *Cogitor ergo sum* (I am thought, therefore I am).<sup>28</sup> Not, we know God, but God knows us, as Paul asserts in Gal 4:9. Or David in Ps 139:1: "O LORD, you have searched me and you know me." Knowing means searching, probing, judging. In God's Word our being and his judgment coincide.<sup>29</sup> We are what He judges us to be. His opinion, his judgment can be summarized in two words: Sin and grace, curse and acquittal, crucifixion and resurrection.

### **Absolute Moment and Continuity in Time**

Noordmans's relation to Barth is ambivalent. During a discussion between Barth and a small group of Dutch theologians that particularly impressed him (1926), Noordmans,

<sup>28</sup> *VW* 3, 560, Ook *VW* 1, 354

<sup>29</sup> JM Hasselaar, *O Noordmans, Hoofdmomenten van zijn Theologie*, ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1925), 27.

according to Barth, ‘towered above the rest in originality and caliber’.<sup>30</sup> In spite of having great appreciation for especially the early Barth, Noordmans has no great desire to be baptized with his name.<sup>31</sup>

Drawing a critical line that increases from Martin Luther via Kohlbrugge to Karl Barth, Noordmans depicts this theology of the *absolute moment*<sup>32</sup> as *Lutherism on the march*. It excludes any continuity between cross and resurrection, *peccator et justus*, creation and consummation, culture and Kingdom, human personality and born-again humanity, in short, time and eternity. Barth’s theology of creative ‘Neuprädikation’ is the antipode to Bergson’s ‘creative evolution’ with its concomitant notion of duration.<sup>33</sup> We are not gradually transformed from sinners to saints. *Our* duration is nothing but the continuity of sin.<sup>34</sup> No uninterrupted transition is possible from God’s *No* to his *Yes*, from death to life, from Sodom to Salem.<sup>35</sup> We cannot reach the resurrection by extending the line of the fall *ad infinitum* for the former is situated in the opposite direction. God’s judging Word recreates life from death, righteousness from wickedness in one, eternal, *absolute moment* in which God’s rejecting *No* is followed by his electing *Yes*.

Noordmans, belonging to the Reformed fold, is strongly in favour of a strengthening of the dialectical tension within Reformed theology in which not human morality (*kleine religie*) but the grace of God (*de grote religie*) is the overriding reality.<sup>36</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century moral life almost replaced Christian faith. Schleiermacher was in his element when it comes to ethics. In dogmatics he was like an auctioneer at a jumble sale selling the dogma at a very liberal discount.<sup>37</sup>

The Reformed doctrine of predestination proclaims God’s mercy *jenseits von Gut und Böse*,<sup>38</sup> excluding any line leading from human ethics to God’s merciful election. That does not imply that God’s grace is *unethical* but rather that it is *supra-ethical* creating an ethical sphere in which *faith is transformed into life without ceasing to be faith*.<sup>39</sup> Our passing morality<sup>40</sup> is but a parable of God’s everlasting Kingdom of divine Love, which we, living and believing between two worlds, can neither build nor see.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, God’s time-embracing eternity does not exclude our history but gives it content and meaning. Noordmans even claims that God takes his eternal decisions at the very last moment.<sup>42</sup>

In Reformed theology the absolute, eternal moment of God’s *No*, followed by his *Yes*, is extended throughout our entire time-space. This is expressed in the Reformed confession of the perseverance of the saints. Noordmans deems it a fundamental flaw in the early Barth’s exclusively Christological focus that it tends to exclude the work of the Holy Spirit. It is also reflected in Barth’s view of the discontinuous, intermittent character of the Word that seems to deny any continuity between Peter’s first sermon on Pentecost and the

<sup>30</sup> Eberhardt Busch, *Karl Barth. His life from letters and autobiographical texts*, (London, Philadelphia: SCM, Fortress, 1976), 170.

<sup>31</sup> *VW* 3, 635.

<sup>32</sup> *VW* 3, 520f.

<sup>33</sup> *VW* 3, 572.

<sup>34</sup> *VW* 3, 600.

<sup>35</sup> *VW* 3, 570; *VW* 8, 108.

<sup>36</sup> *VW* 3, 525. Cf. GJ Paul, *Schepping en Koninkrijk*, 61-65.

<sup>37</sup> *VW* 3, 605.

<sup>38</sup> *VW* 2, 126.

<sup>39</sup> *VW* 2, 27; *VW* 2, 188.

<sup>40</sup> *VW* 8, 34-43.

<sup>41</sup> *VW* 2, 425.

<sup>42</sup> *VW* 8, 110.

minister's last sermon the previous Sunday.<sup>43</sup> Certainly, it is not a continuity that proceeds from the first, miserable principles of the falling creation (Gal 4:3, 9, Col 2:8). It neither involves a return to paradise, nor a naïve human endeavour to build God's Kingdom in the time between Pentecost and the final *Parousia*. It rather resembles seeds that fall from that final, definitive future into the field of this passing world<sup>44</sup> creating symbols, signs, and sacraments of the world to come. In the Reformed view of the relation between God's Word and time that corresponds with the doctrine of the economic Trinity, Noordmans senses something of a purified *durée* (continuity) of God's grace in which time touches eternity. Yesterday and tomorrow are not separated but rather united in an enduring present, in the same way as Moses and Elijah are gathered round Jesus on the mountain of the transfiguration.<sup>45</sup>

For more or less the very opposite reason, Noordmans is much more critical of the later Barth he encounters in the latter's doctrine of creation. Now he fears that Barth's *supralapsarian* approach in which not *homo creatus et lapsus* but *homo creandus et labilis* is the object of election, involves a shift in focus from the cross to the incarnation entailing a form of continuity between creation and incarnation Barth previously abandoned. *Nature and grace* (goodness) are placed rather peacefully alongside one another replacing *sin and grace* (forgiveness) facing critically each other. The Son of Man becomes the ideal man substituting the suffering Servant who was made sin for our sake.<sup>46</sup> In the language of Augustine and Luther one could say that Christ as *exemplum* overshadows Christ as *sacramentum*. We should, however, never forget the ugly cross standing at the point where the new creation touches the old as a permanent reminder of a confrontation that prohibits any direct, undialectical transition from the old to the new.<sup>47</sup>

### Creation as Accommodatio

The Father is not a Maker and his Son not a Mender.<sup>48</sup> Creation is a forensic category.<sup>49</sup> God is Spirit and works by judging i.e. by separating (*krinein* = to judge = to separate). The resultant form is fine but fragile. It exists exclusively in the judging Word that alone is able to keep the lurking chaotic powers at bay. The fallen form is intent upon autonomous duration but has no life of its own. The school (academy) that focuses solely on the form is like children playing with gunpowder.<sup>50</sup>

The Hebrew *dabar* means *word* as well as *object*. *God speaks and it stands*, says Ps 33:9. *The heavens declare the glory of God*, sings Ps 19:1. Creation is, if you like, *God's talk* through which He addresses us.<sup>51</sup> In the consummation of time awaits for us a more direct, immediate knowledge of God but in the meantime, before the 'earthen pitchers are broken at the spring' and believing is transformed into seeing, we must abide by these transcendental, created vessels as the form of God's revelation.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *VW* 3, 661. See also *VW* 2, 188.

<sup>44</sup> *VW* 3, 661.

<sup>45</sup> *VW* 2, 190.

<sup>46</sup> *VW* 3, 685-688; *VW* 2, 278f.

<sup>47</sup> *VW* 3, 631.

<sup>48</sup> *VW* 3, 687.

<sup>49</sup> HW de Knijff, *Geest en Gestalte: O Noordmans' bijbeluitlegging in hermeneutisch verband*, (Wageningen: Veenman & Zonen, 1970), 40.

<sup>50</sup> *VW* 3, 657.

<sup>51</sup> *VW* 1, 159.

<sup>52</sup> *VW* 8, 344.

Created form is not final. In Noordmans's view creation should not be seen as a fait accompli but as *creatio continua*. Consequently, the border between creation and history is floating. Nature and historical facts are forms through which God addresses us. From early on Noordmans<sup>53</sup> wrestles with the relation between created form (*gestalte*) and divine Spirit (*gees*), historical fact and spiritual meaning, print and text. He rejects the rationalism reflected in Lessing's (in)famous statement that the accidental truths of history can never become the proof of the necessary truths of reason; as well as Fichte's a-historism echoing in his exclamation that not the historical but the metaphysical saves us. At the same time he emphatically discards the superficiality of empirism and historism. Nor does he endorse naïve realism.

According to Calvin the creation narrative is God's accommodation to our inability to understand. God knows us eternally but, in order that we should also know Him, Noordmans sees not only the creation narrative in Genesis but creation itself as God's accommodation in addressing us. When creation is predominantly understood as *act*, then it resembles a door we must open to discover the Doer behind the deed or the metaphysical mystery behind the form. However, when creation is primarily seen as *word*, it becomes a medium in which we encounter the Speaker himself addressing us directly. His words are like windows through which we look into his heart. Not, *Im Anfang war die That* as Goethe's Faust pronounces, but rather, *In the beginning was the Word*, as the apostle John proclaims.<sup>54</sup>

Noordmans does concur with *Faust's* contention that all passing reality is but a parable. Nature *per se* is dumb and confusing. Historical forms *as such* say nothing.<sup>55</sup> Jesus' own flesh and blood did not reveal to Peter that He was the Christ. All principalities and powers, all crises and conflicts, the *Third Reich* and the *Soviet Union*, our social programmes and political policies, the church and the sacraments, are by themselves merely specks of dust we observe in the light of eternity. As parables of judgment and promises of salvation, they point beyond themselves to the eschatological Kingdom of God that judges and gives meaning to them.<sup>56</sup>

Noordmans loves to tell a story related by Goethe in his *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.<sup>57</sup> While Goethe was still a student in Dresden he one morning spent some time in an art gallery looking at paintings of the Dutch masters. That night he could not sleep. Looking at his room through the eyes of the artists, the antique furniture took on, what he calls, a *magische Haltung*. They seemed to be alive with spirit. They talked with him. Object and subject were no longer isolated from one another. The dumb form of the furniture was transformed by spirit into living language.

Neither creation nor fall is completed in the creation narrative. God's judging-creative Word drives the powers out into the open by driving creation forward in its fall. The law was added to lure sin that was lurking in the shadows into the open in order to destroy them. In the process God follows his falling creation in its fall. That involves an increase in accommodation perceived as revealing through concealing. The darkness deepens from creation to incarnation, which Noordmans calls *complete accommodation*, that again increases in obscurity<sup>58</sup> from Christ's birth to his burial to such an extent that the

<sup>53</sup> *VW 1*, 126-166.

<sup>54</sup> *VW 1*, 160.

<sup>55</sup> *VW 1*, 161.

<sup>56</sup> *VW 2*, 82f.

<sup>57</sup> *VW 1*, 136, *VW 4*, 435.

<sup>58</sup> See *VW 2*, 90f.

imagination of faith cannot keep up any longer. We need more Holy Spirit recognizing God's Word in the likeness of sinful humanity (Rom 8:3) hanging from a tree, than to see the glory of God manifested in the magnificent night sky, which Immanuel (!) Kant so mightily admired.<sup>59</sup> In his anxious cry of God-forsakenness it seems that Christ can hardly recognize himself. It sounds like an echo of John the Baptist's frightening question now put in the first person: *Am I the One who was to come?*<sup>60</sup>

### **The Cross of Christ and the Holy Spirit**

As the Word goes forth from the Beginning, the Spirit proceeds from the End. As Christ is called 'the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world' (Revelation 13:8), the Spirit is the *Creator Spiritus* whose creative activity ensues from the eschatological future that is founded in Christ's death and resurrection. As Christ is called the *last* (final) *Adam* or human being (1 Cor 15:45), the Spirit can be called the *last God* i. e. the Creator who has suffered a lot with (and through) his creation without abandoning the work of his hands.<sup>61</sup>

In the *Acts of the Apostles* Noordmans discerns a movement he describes as *Paul comes and Peter goes*.<sup>62</sup> This corresponds to the movement from Easter to Pentecost in which Christ's Interpreter and our Comforter, the Holy Spirit, comes and Jesus goes.<sup>63</sup> The incarnation is not prolonged in the church but extended in its opposite: The coming of the Spirit from the other side of death.<sup>64</sup>

The symbolic *Forty Days* between resurrection and ascension was not a resumption of Jesus' previous presence. Nor was it a period of uninterrupted communion with his disciples that transformed our time into forty days of some sort of eternity. This is borne out by the fact that in the Gospel of Luke the resurrection is almost immediately followed by the Ascension, forming one event. The empty tomb does not imply the resuscitation of a corpse our side of the grave. The whole disgusting carcass of the old Adam, as Kohlbrugge<sup>65</sup> insists, is dead and buried forever. Jesus' body had not been abandoned, but like a grain of wheat that must disappear in order that a new plant can appear, Christ's passing form was transformed into a new, *spiritual body* (1 Cor 15:44) that was hidden in his formless death.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, we should see the resurrected Jesus' appearances as intermittent epiphanies in which Christ's presence is fading away, culminating in the Ascension as a prelude to Pentecost.<sup>67</sup>

Christ's parting and Pentecost are connected like cross and resurrection. The rather sheepish question of the disciples regarding the restoration of the kingdom of Israel (Acts 1:6) reminds Noordmans of the naïve optimism in many Anglo-Saxon countries regarding the human, all too human, coming of God's Kingdom. Although it can sometimes be rather endearing, particularly in contrast to the pervasive pessimism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he is critical of the superficial optimism that sees the labour in the Lord's vineyard as a sort

<sup>59</sup> *VW* 8, 187.

<sup>60</sup> *VW* 8, 255.

<sup>61</sup> See *VW* 8, 142-144.

<sup>62</sup> *VW* 8, 429-451.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *VW* 8, 342.

<sup>64</sup> *VW* 2, 279.

<sup>65</sup> *VW* 3, 320.

<sup>66</sup> See *VW* 3, 631f.

<sup>67</sup> See O Hofius, "Die Einzigartigkeit der Apostel Jesu Christi" in: I Galanis u. a. (Hg.), *Diakonia Leitourgia Charisma. Patristic and Contemporary Exegesis of the New Testament. FS Georgios Ant. Galatis*, (Levadeia bzw.: Athens, 2006), 275-290.



of spiritual sport.<sup>68</sup> It does not take into account the important place of suffering in the coming of the Kingdom. Nor does it realise the close connection between cross and resurrection or the fact that Christ has returned to his Father. Without the consolation of the Spirit Christians are like the nonplussed (*beteuterde*) disciples on Ascension Day. The Spirit did not save the disciples from suffering but encouraged the apostles to testify (*marturein!*) to the cross and the resurrection as one event.<sup>69</sup> Through the work of the Holy Spirit as James Luther May<sup>70</sup> maintains, *the hour of Jesus informs all time. In the Resurrection the Passion has become a Presence 'that is with you always, to the close of the age.'*

As the Moses of the New Testament (2 Cor 3) the apostle Paul dies daily. Noordmans finds 1 Cor 4:9 a striking description of Calvary translated into the lives of the apostles. In the famous 1 Cor 13 the cross of Christ is made audible in the life of the apostle of the Holy Spirit.<sup>71</sup> It is a cruciform<sup>72</sup> life of sacrifice and service for Christ's sake. In the West we tend to talk a lot about service like civil service, military service, social service, church service, etc. However, we are continuously tempted to seek in that service the glorious form that the *Servant of the Lord* forsook for our sake.<sup>73</sup>

Easter is a window to and from heaven through which God sees eternally his broken creation and our rebellious history in the crucified body of his Son and our Saviour.<sup>74</sup> Through this narrow exit out of death and destruction the wind of the Spirit blows<sup>75</sup> sustaining us with faith, hope and love as a surplus provided from above.<sup>76</sup> Love is the highest, because it stoops the lowest. Christ's descending to hell was his lifting up to heaven. He is not merely a social reformer, for He is the crucified King himself on God's heavenly throne.

In conclusion: Noordmans uses a parable to point to the hidden work of the Holy Spirit in our present dispensation.<sup>77</sup> For forty years he had a flower garden without once seeing the sun itself labouring in the flowerbeds among the shrubs and the roses. Nevertheless, always and everywhere it was germinating and sprouting, lavishly budding, blossoming and blooming. That reminds him of Jerusalem our Mother above<sup>78</sup> (Gal 4:26), the church veiled in mystery, often without knowing it herself, being prepared by the loving Spirit, our motherly God, as a bride beautifully dressed for her bridegroom who is coming (Rev 21:2).

<sup>68</sup> *VW* 8, 338-340.

<sup>69</sup> *VW* 8, 336.

<sup>70</sup> James Luther Mays, "Now I Know: An Exposition of Genesis 22:1-19 and Matthew 26:36-56" in: Wallace M Alston Jr., Michael Welker (ed.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity 2. Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition*, (Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), 180f.

<sup>71</sup> *VW* 8, 409

<sup>72</sup> Michael J Gorman 2001. *Cruciformity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. See also PF Theron, "Unity and Justification: The faithfulness of God, the faith/fullness of Christ, and the faith of the church" in: EAJG van der Borght (ed), *Religion without ulterior Motive*, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006), 130f.

<sup>73</sup> *VW* 8, 312.

<sup>74</sup> *VW* 8, 321-323. See also 326 on Christ *bodily* death and *bodily* resurrection.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *VW* 2, 210: "De geest gaat niet van de ruimte, maar uit de enge. Hij is een schreeuw der ziel als die van het hijgend hert, der jacht ontkomen. Niet de harmonie des levens, maar het lelike kruis is het beginsel waaruit de geest geboren wordt."

<sup>76</sup> *VW* 8, 387-388

<sup>77</sup> *VW* 8, 340

<sup>78</sup> Cf. *VW* 8, 26-34.