CHAPTER TWELVE

ACCOMMODATION AND INCARNATION: A FAVOURITE CONCEPT OF CALVIN IN THE THEOLOGY OF OEPKE NOORDMANS

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“God-Talk” as “God’s Talk”

During the later part of the previous century there was a lot of talk in theological circles about “God-talk” in the sense of human talk about God. In contrast, the idea of accommodation in Calvin’s theology deals primarily with God’s talking to us.1 As Paul Helm puts it: “God accommodates himself to us: we do not accommodate God to ourselves.”2 While the latter amounts to idolatry, the former accords with the opening words of Hebrews: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days God has spoken to us by the Son, whom God appointed heir of all things, and through whom God made the universe.”3

In Christ, the Son, the Creator-Father has bridged the “epistemic gap”4 between Self and his alienated creation. Consequently, Sallie McFague’s statement, “When we try to speak of God there is nothing which resembles what we can conceive when we say that word,”5 provokes Carl Braaten to counter in the spirit of the Reformers: “Then what on earth is the incarnation for? Then what was Jesus all about?”6 He insists that the descriptive task—speaking about God—as well as the prescriptive task—speaking for

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1 Calvin can also insist that we accommodate ourselves to God’s justice, integrity and righteousness. See, Paul Helm, John Calvin’s Ideas (Oxford University Press, 2006), 186.
2 Helm, Calvin’s Ideas, 196.
3 Heb. 1:1.
4 Helm, Calvin’s Ideas, 31.
God—is rooted in God’s speaking to us in prophecy and proclamation, creating in us the ascriptive act of prayer and praise.7

Even though the principle of accommodation is a recurring theme throughout the theology of Calvin, it has only recently become a focal point of theological research. In the introductory chapter to his work The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology (1952), Edward Dowey has a section on “The accommodated character of all knowledge of God,”8 but it was Ford Lewis Battles’ article 25 years later, “God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity,”9 that really sparked off the discussion. As recently as 2006 Jon Balserak’s study, Divinity Compromised: A study of divine accommodation in the thought of John Calvin,10 was the first monograph in any language dedicated to this topic.

It is sometimes intimated that since Schleiermacher until the middle of the previous century the idea of accommodation has more or less disappeared from the theological scene. That, most definitely, is not the case within Dutch Reformed theology. J. de Jong submits that in Herman Bavink “it functions as a central principle governing all revelation.”11 With regard to Klaas Schilder he sees accommodation as a persistent “background theme” in all his works.12

I would like to add another name to the list: Oepke Noordmans (1871–1956). In his Collected Works (published 1978–2004) we come across this subject on a number of occasions, often in contexts where it is clear that it functions as a key concept having a bearing on significant notions in Noordmans’ oeuvre. In accordance with Calvin, Noordmans sees the suffering Servant as the climax of God’s accommodation.13

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11 J. de Jong, Accommodatio Dei; A Theme in K. Schilder’s Theology of Revelation (Kampen: Dissertatie-Uitgeverij, 1990), 62.
12 De Jong, Accommodatio Dei, 63; see also 9.
13 Calvin had an important forming influence on the thought of Noordmans as is clear from his first finger exercises to his final volume of meditations. Of course, being Noordmans, he deals with Calvin in a manner that is very much his own. As always, his focus is not primarily historical but theological. The living Word, as the unity of form and Spirit, is decisive. In this regard Noordmans has coined the concept, “historical spiritualism,” that stands over against mere “antiquarian” historicity. O. Noordmans, Verzamelde Werken (Collected Works) (Kampen: Kok, 1978–2004) (henceforth: Noordmans, VW) vol. 1, 99.