Karel Blei


This book provides a valuable contribution to the exposure of the Dutch Theologian, Oepke Noordmans, to the English speaking world. Although the title might suggest a more dogmatic discussion of Noordmans’ view on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, Blei gives a historical account of the most important events in the life of this Dutch “church father,” interspersed with short and to the point discussion of his most important works. His influence in the restructuring of the Netherlands Reformed Church is also discussed quite extensively.

In the foreword Paul R. Fries points out the relevance of Noordmans for the North American Church, because this book forms part of The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America. He sees only an indirect influence on American theology through its contact with other Dutch theologians that were influenced by Noordmans. I agree with him that the innovative and sometimes troubling influence of Noordmans’ view on themes like creation, predestination, incarnation, eschatology and the Holy Spirit, could greatly contribute to a more critical and edifying dialogue on these themes in America.

Blei starts off with some biographical information about Noordmans’ childhood and education and touches on the different influences on his life and thought. He points out how Noordmans emphasized the humane character of the gospel in opposition to an often stale orthodoxy and asked fundamental questions concerning the difference between rationalistic concepts of truth and the historical character of faith.

Blei recounts the conflict that Noordmans encountered in his first congregation, which made him rethink the role of a pastor in a congregation. The pastor is more than just a ‘pulpire’ who must please the crowd. Blei shows how Noordmans was concerned about social questions, which included justice for the poor. He was critical of all views of work, personhood and humanity, which do not find its foundation in the Word of God. His critical reflection reached ground breaking heights in his articles “Predestination” and “Belief on Authority”, which fundamentally criticizes human morality, autonomy and rationality from the perspective of God’s election and authority.

Noordmans moved to Laren in 1923. Here Noordmans continued his study of Karl Barth. He concurred with his critical view of humanity, but had his reservations about the development of Barth’s theology from the basis of the natures of Christ, which does not leave room for the work of Christ as it is continued through the Holy Spirit.
Blei discusses how Noordmans’ study of Augustine influenced his view on the church, which was especially relevant as he became part of the reorganization of the Netherlands Protestant Church. The church is not a mere association; it must be seen from the perspective of the heavenly Kingdom of love, which stands over and against the Kingdom of self-love. This was very relevant in a time when the German church was placed before a decision between these alternatives.

In Chapter 8, Blei discusses Noordmans’ aphoristic mini-dogmatic written in 1934—*Herschepping* (Re-creation). This Trinitarian work brings the whole field of Systematic Theology, as it is relevant for preaching, together around the central dogmas of predestination and justification by faith. The Father is the Creator-divider through his judgments, the Son performs the work of the three offices, but the incarnation does not continue in the church or the believer, but in the all-encompassing re-creative work of the Holy Spirit.

The following 2 chapters give a quite extensive account of the contributions Noordmans made in the discussions on the reorganization of the Netherlands Reformed Church. It relates the clashes between the Ethical party and the confessionals in the struggle and also the personal differences in opinion on the way forward. Noordmans contributed to the discussion by pointing out the ecumenical and missional character of the church, which must allow for human frailty and at the same time he pleaded for eschatological discipline to prevent the church from becoming just another national church.

Noordmans stood for a sober liturgy where God would not be at our disposal or be represented as such. The church service is no mystery play and heaven and earth do not meet there spectacularly. In liturgy, the focus must be on the preaching of the Word of God in all its clarity and it must be aimed at the spreading of the gospel.

In the final chapters, Blei relates Noordmans’ personal struggles in the war and the eventual liberation. These experiences gave him a new appreciation for the bodily salvation proclaimed in the gospels. He developed a poignant and lucid view on this subject in his work *Zondaar en Bedelaar* (Sinner and Beggar). Noordmans’ more mature works include *Koninkryk der Hemelen* (Kingdom of Heaven), which is a critique on parts of the Heidelberg Catechism, where Noordmans points out that the biblical notion of the Kingdom of God brings movement and expectation into faith and much more so than a mere belief in Providence. In *Gestalte en Geest* (Form and Spirit) one can trace his thoughts on the work of the Spirit. By way of short meditations Noordmans points out that the continuation of the incarnation is not to be found in the church or in the believer or even in person of Jesus Christ, but in the comforting and interpreting work of the Spirit.