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*Dordt College*

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# The Dilemma of the Female Christian College Graduate

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Women are shaped by their values. Women are shaped by their beliefs. A Christian woman believes in commitment, allegiance to God being first and uppermost, including dedication of time, talent, and its development to God. She knows she is created in God's image; she believes in relationships with other human beings, the loveliest of which is marriage and family. Small wonder then that in decision making, the thinking female Christian college graduate sometimes wonders, "Exactly *who* am I?"

The Bible honors marriage and the wife-and-mother role, but it does not restrict women to a fixed and inflexible

role. Today the definition of motherhood effectively restricts a woman from following a career with the same force and concentration as a man. In the Old Testament era, surprisingly enough, when women were hardly considered more than chattels, and education for women was almost non-existent, a few women were already known for their careers: a judgeship (Judges 4:4), estate manager and real estate sales person (Proverbs 31:14-24), and prophetess (I Kings 22).

The thoughtful *married* Christian career woman today faces a very complicated life; often within her is a deep need to prove herself, to appear as

super-wife, super-mother, super-professional. Inability to measure up to her self-set standards produces feelings of guilt.

Of the female Christian college graduate, on the other hand, who by choice or otherwise remains unmarried, Paul comments, "An unmarried woman is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit" (I Cor. 7:34). But today this woman trudges a lonely journey in a culture which says but does not practice that it has room for single women as well as couples.

For most young women graduating from Christian colleges there is no apparent dilemma. They plan to work until the "right person" comes along and then gladly will be married and drop career plans. However, this does not absolve them from the responsibility of higher education; Christians may not look at four years of higher Christian education as a luxury to be enjoyed for whatever reasons as though that education is their sole property. If they do not realize the dilemma implicit in the situation, perhaps the concept of "serviceable insight" has made too little impact.

This dilemma is often not recognized by Christian colleges and their graduates, both female and male, but until this dilemma is recognized, faced, and studied, talents and abilities which have been educated for serviceable insight are not being fully used and a Spirit-pleasing resolution remains elusive.

### Dilemma

The Christian woman of today no longer has one clearly defined, simple, single role of mothering or parenting. The woman who is the product of seventeen years of Christian education, including four years at a Christian

college, knows that the Lord expects her to carry out his cultural mandate according to her abilities and her training.

Dordt College, seeking to fulfill its task, says in *The Educational Task of Dordt College*:

To understand the nature of education, we must see it against the background of God's mandate to subdue the earth. [M]an [The term man is used in the generic sense.] must develop and conserve the created order. Moreover, as God's image-bearer, man is capable of fulfilling this mandate because God, in calling man to his task, also equips him. Education, in its broadest sense, is an essential element in the development and exercise of that capability.

The central educational task of Dordt College is to provide genuinely Christian insight on an advanced level. *In our increasingly complex age, such insight is no luxury* [emphasis added].

[I]t is the educational task of Dordt College to provide genuinely Christian, that is, truly *serviceable insight*. *Such insight is not designed to enhance the service of one's self, but, rather, seeks to equip the Christian community [men and women] to respond obediently* [emphasis added] to the central Scriptural command "Love God above all, and your neighbor as yourself."

Such serviceable insight is, in effect, a contemporary expression of the Scriptural references to *wisdom and understanding*. . . . "Look carefully, then, how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore don't be

foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." (Eph. 5:15-17)

Serviceable insight, therefore, prepares for Kingdom citizenship. And Dordt, as a Christian college, aims to train Kingdom citizens [men and women] aware of the demands of the cultural mandate, equipped to take their place and carry out their tasks within the community of believers, able to discern the spiritual direction of our civilization, and prepared to advance, in loving service, the claims of Christ over all areas of life.<sup>1</sup>

The *Heidelberg Catechism*, in Question and Answer 55, also speaks to the issue:

Believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and *all his treasures and gifts*. Each member should consider it his duty [emphasis added] to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.

For many college women there is no problem; they prefer marriage, see it as completely incompatible with a career, and are content with the love and joy of motherhood. But this does not negate the challenge of stewardship implied in Dordt College's *The Educational Task of Dordt College* and the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

Educational opportunities for women are not equally distributed. Thirty-eight percent of the world's school age population, or 121 million children, do not attend school. Most of these are girls.<sup>2</sup> These sixty or more million girls who receive no education do not carry the same responsibilities as college graduates, particularly Christian college

graduates. "From everyone who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48).

In God's order there are male and female. *Together* men and women are called upon to be fruitful; *together* they are given the cultural mandate. Both are to be educated in serviceable insight. This concept, however, has been clouded by the clamor for "women's rights." It is regrettable that the women's rights movement has created so many reams of argument and hours of rhetoric which have been rejected without analysis because of emotional fears born of the extremists' demands.

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The word "rights" is judged to be unseemly by many who look at Christ's servant role. But this paper does not deal with women's rights; it speaks to women's *responsibilities*, which suggests there is a need for opportunity to carry out these responsibilities and a need for a climate in which these opportunities are not automatically limited to the parenting role traditionally assigned almost solely to mothers. To deny a Christian woman the opportunity to exercise the highest possible function with the gifts God has entrusted to her is wrong. So much is wrong that serious Christians and the church ought to examine this wrongness in the light of

traditional and cultural values in the context of contemporary Scriptural interpretation.

Men are not born with equal gifts; women are not born with equal gifts. Calvinists celebrate the uniqueness of individuals created in God's image and delight in the fulfillment of one's calling according to one's individual abilities. Calvinists confess a sovereign God, including his sovereignty in his free distribution of gifts. Is it right then to say women may not develop these gifts and exercise them, or worse, develop them and then not exercise them, because biologically they bear the children?

**Career**

Obviously the dilemma that women face today has been created in great part by forces not religious; cultural, economic, and social factors have affected Christians. But the greatest change for Christian women in the twentieth century is the added privilege and responsibility of Christian education, particularly Christian higher education.

Before women were educated the matter of careers was not a problem. Christians, however, believe that all people are created in God's image and fathers encouraged their daughters to become educated. In fact, the present enrollment (1980-81) at Dordt College shows more women than men. A breakdown of the major areas in which Dordt College women have enrolled shows that all are being made aware of serviceable insight:<sup>3</sup>

|               |    |
|---------------|----|
| Accounting    | 27 |
| Agri-Business | 1  |
| Agriculture   | 3  |
| Art           | 9  |
| Biology       | 20 |
| Bus. Adm.     | 48 |

|               |              |
|---------------|--------------|
| Bus. Ed.      | 12           |
| Chemistry     | 4            |
| Communication | 10           |
| Elem. Ed      | 212          |
| Engineering   | 2            |
| English       | 19           |
| German        | 4            |
| History       | 7            |
| Mathematics   | 2            |
| Music         | 24           |
| Nat. Science  | 3            |
| Phys. Ed.     | 26           |
| Pol. Science  | 2            |
| Psychology    | 18           |
| Soc. Science  | 2            |
| Soc. Service  | 37           |
| Sociology     | 7            |
| Theater Arts  | 5            |
| Theology      | 3            |
| Other         | 120          |
|               | (not listed) |

Most of these women, then, upon graduation will be prepared for careers. Some see clearly that their Christian education implicitly requires that they serve the Lord in the career or profession for which they have been educated. Why is this a dilemma? Why not a career and marriage?

It is precisely the woman who has taken her college education seriously, who has learned to question, to examine, and to integrate the ideas and concepts with her own thoughts, who has the greatest difficulty.

A Dordt College senior expressed her desire to serve on a foreign field for the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee. When she was asked what she would answer, should she be offered marriage, she replied with a sigh, "I guess if he wouldn't go along, I just couldn't go." An honest answer. But the right answer?

The Kingdom of God cannot be trifled with. The Kingdom calls for total, radical obedience. The Kingdom is not merely a theoretical concept. Christ

meant Christian women to take this seriously.

The secular philosophy of the women's rights movement, Christians say, must not be taken seriously, and many Christians refuse to allow the movement any legitimacy. Thus, a woman's desire to serve in the Kingdom in her chosen career *and* to be married is often negatively labeled as a selfish insistence on rights. One might also ask, to continue this line of reasoning, what "right" do women have to prefer the loveliness of marriage and family when there are so few qualified to do the many tasks which require a college-educated person? If college education does not have as one of its prime purposes serviceable insight, can the expense be justified for would-be mothers? Is college education a right? Or is it merely a means to acquire personal happiness?

Women's rights are often regarded as selfish, un-Christian, social means to individual happiness. God did not, however, call us first of all to be happy. Rather He called us to be holy and to be faithful; to think only in terms of one's rights either in the family or in the career is wrong.

It is also stated that a Christian liberal arts education will enrich a marriage, and that may be true. But in a more specific way, liberal arts coupled with studies in human ecology might increase the knowledge and skills of a woman whose role is limited by marriage and motherhood, and these courses are not offered at Dordt College at this time. Rather, the majors now offered are designed primarily to prepare women for careers outside the home.

## **Marriage**

The most common path for women is marriage and family. No surprise, of course. Marriage fills needs for

relationships, having children, love and security. It is still the most common path for Christian men to take as well. Both women and men have prepared for careers during their four years at a Christian college.

Technology also has made its impact; there have been losses as well as gains. One gain is that mother has been released from many tasks homemakers knew before the days of carefree linoleum or carpeting, clean heat, automatic dishwashers, washers, dryers and wrinkle-free clothes, freezers, and food in boxes.

The family is God's way of continuing the covenant. Marriage normally involves having children, and children need the stability and security of both father and mother. But in America it seems that the importance of self, self-development, self-realization, and personal rights have taken precedence over marriage and children. Popular books like Nancy Friendly's *My Mother My Self* and Gail Sheehy's *Passages* paint the dilemma of the mother/career person in secular terms, but they also provide the secular answer, divorce, as a necessary and quite normal stepping stone to self-realization for men and women. Only lip service is given to the sacredness of marriage and family.

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freezers, and food in boxes. Menial chores for women have decreased, although the tyranny of machines has added to father's usual task of keeping equipment repaired.

Yet, mothers are still busy at home. Indeed, they are industrious. True, a house is merely an assortment of things, gadgets, food, and equipment, and a home is people and the quality of their relationships. An awareness of purpose and motive, which Christian women have, lifts the house into a home, and a deep appreciation for material blessings is expressed. Because the phrase "motherhood and apple pie" is almost inviolate, to consider the implications of the subject of mothering, better called parenting, is to risk being accused of heresy.

The family, as Christians have learned it, is based on a well-established, seemingly sacrosanct division of labor which has become traditional and in many respects equated with a Biblical dictate: husband-father works outside the home to provide the income; mother-wife is responsible for domestic duties and raising the children. All of this presents a strong argument for the mother to be at home.

In effect, this exalted status of mothering belittles the obligation of the father. It has been said that the average American father spends less than half an hour per day with his children; perhaps Christian fathers spend more time. The gentleness with which the Bible speaks of the widow and the fatherless suggests the importance God places on the father's presence and parenting. Father's presence seems at least as important as mother's, but today's lopsided division of parenting time and labor greatly limits father's presence. Perhaps more thought on this matter alone would make a different and better division of time and labor in many families.

Parenting is not primarily a mother's job. Children need the stability of both father and mother. The Bible emphasizes the family and fatherhood. The *cultural pattern* in America places the major share of parenting and responsibility on the mother, but this is not entirely Biblical. Without making any provision for delegating the instruction to another, Deuteronomy 6:6, 7 says to fathers:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

When Eli's and Samuel's sons sinned, a reference is made not to the mother, but to the father:

At that time I will carry out against Eli everything that I spoke against his family—from beginning to end for I told him I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible and he failed to restrain them. (1 Sam. 3:12, 13)

But his sons did not walk in his [Samuel's] ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice. (1 Sam. 8:3)

Although the Bible does not address the mother in specific terms on how to raise a child, the reference to Deuteronomy 6 is strangely absent from our discussion of families today. God has given men twenty-four hours per day and he has given women twenty-four hours per day. Children belong to both parents, and the mother, except

when the father has left his family or has died, has nowhere been designated as surrogate father. Margaret Mead has pointed out that there is no culture in the world in which men have total care of the children, but when total child care is placed on the mother's shoulders by the father's default or absence, Biblical directives must be reexamined.

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Partly because of traditional and cultural emphasis on mothering, fathering has diminished. Men are too often denied much of their role of parenting because of mother's presence and preoccupation with being all in all to children. Easy enough it is to let the role go to women, but it reflects injustice to father, mother, and children, and it severely curtails the blessing and responsibility of parenting for the father.

Rev. Lambertus Mulder, speaking specifically of the role of women in the church, said of women:

Because marriage is a divine institution, given by God, as a creation ordinance, and because it pleases Him to establish His covenant with such families, marriage must be seen as a *calling* indispensable to the plan of God

by His own choice. To be sure, *marriage is not the only calling of man or woman*, but it must be given due consideration. Mother must not consider her position in the family as a necessary evil, nor her daily work as the great bore. She is part of a relationship between Christ and his church; no small affair surely. It is more important that she show covenant obedience in raising *her* children than that she bring home an extra paycheck for ambition's or luxury's sake. *The Kingdom of God must be sought first, says Christ [emphasis added].*<sup>4</sup>

If the problem were so clear and so simple as Mulder suggests, the answers would be more obvious. Suggesting that the mother raise *her* children reenforces the argument that the father's role in parenting is minimized. Also, seeking first the Kingdom of God for a Christian woman does not *automatically* mean the woman is striving for the sake of ambition or luxury, although both might be satisfied. It is precisely and only because the female Christian college graduate is aware of the mandate to seek *first* the Kingdom of God (as Mulder insists must be done), that she is faced with this dilemma.

In an either/or situation, which seems to be the present range of decision-making for most young Christian women, most women gladly opt for marriage and family, but this is neither satisfactory nor permanent. It does not solve the question of stewardship and only postpones realization of the dilemma.

When a woman's youngest child trudges off to school, it is not uncommon for a few tears to flow as the mother realizes the close, rewarding child-mother relationship is over, and a certain emptiness replaces it. The



young children are now in school several hours a day, but their needs have not decreased; they have only changed. Yet mother's time schedule is completely different . . . and often empty.

Some women become totally involved in the committee work of school and church, most of which revolves around social programs and raising money; often this becomes less than satisfying. Very few positions of decision making are open to them. Few women are placed on Christian school boards and even fewer have decision-making and administrative input on any level for the church. Although fathers, after a long day in the world of outside work, would love to stay home with the children, they must hasten away to meet additional obligations to the church. And mother, wishing she could fill those church obligations which only her sex prevents, continues to care for the children. The church needlessly squanders a vast reservoir of talent which has been trained in serviceable insight while taking countless hours of fathering time from fathers and children.

In addition, it is known that for many, many Christian women, especially those in their thirties and early forties, boredom and feelings of guilt and worthlessness set in, causing fatigue and related psychological problems. Discouragement, negativism, and even depression develop. The "tired housewife syndrome" takes over and the wife feels trapped. Feelings of guilt add their weight and the toll is heavy in anxiety and tension.

Meanwhile and sadly, the serviceable insight she acquired at college has diminished, atrophied, or become obsolescent. She feels empty, even cheated, and attempts to join the job market with skills that demand less than her previously-trained abilities

required. The aim is not primarily to serve in God's Kingdom but rather to escape boredom and to fill time.

## Conclusion

There is no easy solution. Obviously the dilemma faced by women today has been created in part by secular, economic, and cultural forces. But such forces do affect Christians. With more women than men in college today, it is not likely that the dilemma will go away.

But because women—Christian women—have now been entrusted and challenged with greater responsibility for serviceable insight to be used in the building of the Kingdom of God, traditional concepts need to be Biblically reevaluated in the context of a contemporary, changing world.

Cumulatively speaking, too much Christian higher education and too many trained talents are being allowed to atrophy and even die. This is not merely a Christian woman's problem. All members of the body of Christ are responsible for one another. Marriage, parenthood, careers, and professions for women now lie on the shoulders of Christian men as well as Christian women. When male and female Christians recognize and face this dilemma and together seek first the Kingdom of God, one step towards a Spirit-filled resolution of the problem will have been taken.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Dordt College, *The Educational Task of Dordt College*, (Sioux Center: Dordt College, 1979), n. pag.

<sup>2</sup>United Nations, "The State of the World's Women," *United Nations Report*, (New York, 1979), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>Dordt College, *Institutional Statistics, 1980-81*, (Sioux Center: Dordt College, 1980), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Lambertus Mulder, "The Role of Women in the Church," *The Banner*, 7 Jan., 1977, p. 8.