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On the Edge of Our Seats: The Educational Opus of Dordt College



by Erik Hoekstra

Students, faculty, staff, members of the board, and faithful friends of Dordt College: Thank you for coming today to celebrate God's continuing provision for leadership at Dordt College. As we gather to commemorate the beginning of a new presidency, I want you to know that I take this appointment seriously. In keeping with the college motto, *Soli Deo Gloria*, I also want to declare that the continuation of leadership at Dordt College and this celebration today center on God alone.

As a welcome and a context for this morning, let's look at Paul's opening words in his letter to the Philippians. They reflect my sense of this place and

Dr. Erik Hoekstra, the fourth president of Dordt College, formerly served as the Provost of Dordt College.

frame the start of my service as the fourth president of Dordt College:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Paul's salutation is a fitting context for our work here. Dordt College is a work that God started in 1955, when a group of men and women saw Christian higher education from a distinctively Reformed perspective as the logical next step—after having founded churches and Christian day schools—in faithfully following the first and greatest commandment: to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

From the very beginning, this college was envisioned as a comprehensive Christian college, working toward Christ-centered renewal in every area of life because the founders also wanted to obediently honor the second commandment: to love their neighbors as themselves.

As Dordt College grew, its leaders affirmed the place and authority of Scripture as a guide for its work. The early foundational document, *Scripturally Oriented Higher Education*, later rewritten and called *The Educational Task of Dordt College*, beautifully and coherently lays out the biblical rationale for

both the *why* and the *how* of a Christian college committed to the Reformed perspective. It answers, through the lens of Scripture, this question: *What is the work of a Christian college?*

A task means that we owe; an opus means that we respond with joy. A task means that it is imposed; an opus means that we freely give. A task has the sense of a minimum standard; an opus has the sense of excellence as our marker.

In my association with Dordt College, first as a faculty member and then as provost, I have developed a deep respect for the *Educational Task* document and consider it the keystone to the solidity of Dordt's mission and vision throughout the history of the college. As president, I intend to have the *Educational Task* remain vibrantly alive in our daily work so that we may remain true to our calling.

Today, I'd like to lead you in thinking creatively for a few minutes about the educational task of Dordt College.

Most of my academic training is in the area of *work*: people at work, organizations and how they work. I'm a student of *work*. A few years ago I did some writing about a Christian view of flourishing at work, beginning by thinking and studying the word itself. The Latin root for *work* is the same as that for the word *urge*: an exertion that wears you out, or to press hard, push, drive, or compel.

Task, a synonym for work, also has an interesting etymology. *Task* shares a root with *tax*, as in something owed as an obligation or a piece of work imposed as a duty, or to burden and put a strain on something.

My Reformed sensibilities don't allow me

to think of our work simply as an obligation or something that we *owe* as payment. From my Reformation history course, I remember that the concept of "good works" and church members paying indulgences as something they *owed* was one of the 95 items that Martin Luther was upset about that afternoon, October 31, 1517.

Since redemption comes from Christ alone and by grace alone, we don't owe anything, it seems to me. Therefore, I find myself bristling a bit at the title *Educational Task*, as though our work is a tax or obligation that we owe or something that we can somehow pay.

I love the content of the *Educational Task*, and I consider it an essential tool to ensure that Dordt College doesn't go the way of many Christian colleges whose light has either died or faded over the past decades, but I wonder whether a more appropriate title for the document might be the Educational Opus of Dordt College.

The Purposes Committee of this college spent many hours plumbing the depths of God's Word to get it right. It is an outstanding document that we will continue to use to qualify board members, hire faculty, and measure ourselves against. But today, I want to suggest that perhaps it could be crowned with a more fitting title.

Opus is another synonym for work. The root of the word *opus* is related to *opera* and defined as a gift of gratitude offered in thanks rather than an obligation imposed as a payment. *Opus* is an effort to produce in abundance—originally related to agriculture, later extended to artistic and other activities.

You may be thinking, "That's just semantics. I don't care what you call it; work is work." But I think this is about more than semantics. It's about the *why* and the *how* of our work here together. A task means that we owe; an opus means that we respond with joy. A task means that it is imposed; an opus means that we freely give. A task has the sense of a minimum standard; an opus has the sense of excellence as our marker. A task says that we're strapped down in our seats until we're done; an opus says that we're on the edge of our seats in order to serve.

As of this week, with my daughter's birthday, I am the parent of four teenagers. The distinction

between task and opus also affects her work as a student. A task frames her work as “I have to do my homework.” An opus says “I get to do my homework.”

The Heidelberg Catechism, as it often can be, is helpful here. It begins by asking *What is your only comfort in life and in death?* Another way to ask the question might be this: How can you even get up in the morning and go to work, whatever that work might be?

The response, which I’m sure many of you in attendance today could say with me, is this:

That I am not my own,
but belong—
body and soul,
in life and in death—
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.
He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious
blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.
He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;
in fact, all things must work together for my
salvation.

You might almost think, “Hey, this sounds pretty good. It’s almost like there isn’t any work for me to do at all. Sounds to me like Christ did it all.” And you’re right. The real *work* in God’s covenant of grace was fully done by Christ’s shed blood. The tax is fully paid. We have no obligation under the law any longer.

But then, before we can relax—in a truly Reformed spin on life—the answer isn’t complete quite yet. Just when we start to confuse our *comfort* with getting *comfortable*, the catechism makes a dramatic turn and finishes in this way:

Because I belong to him,
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.

I’ve always loved those words of the catechism: *Wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.*

Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we can have comfort, to be sure, but it’s not the type

of comfort that encourages us to slouch back in our seats and leave it all up to him. It is the type of comfort that assures us of God’s sovereignty and providence, of the Savior’s death and resurrection for us, and of the Spirit’s daily work of counsel and peace in us.

In response to that great comfort, we are asked to move to the edge of our seats and participate wholeheartedly in a ready and willing posture, to work for God. That sounds more like opus work than task work to me. The catechism makes clear in the narrative of God’s creating the world and our falling away from God in sin that God’s redemptive work in us and his creation through Christ is work that is already done, but not yet complete. Our work does matter to God.

The comforting conclusion to this answer clearly has a sense of action to it. It’s the kind of comfort that allows us to sit confidently on the edge of our seats, getting to work wholeheartedly, with everything we’ve got, ready and willing to live for him. Wholeheartedly ready and willing to live for Christ feels a little like orchestra members just before a symphony begins, sitting on the edge of their seats, poised with eagerness and expectation, knowing that something beautiful is going to happen.

The idea of participating in Dordt’s educational opus gets my heart pounding and moves me to the edge of my seat. An opus is creative, fruitful, flourishing, and extravagant. I challenge you today to think about the development of Dordt College as an opus of thanksgiving to God for his great love for us in Christ Jesus and to move to the edge of your seat and commit with me to the joyous work that is before us.

For students, solving calculus problems, creating sculpture in an art studio, and writing comparative essays on Augustine and Aristotle for Core 140 can at times, I’m sure, feel like a task. For faculty, attending committee meetings, grading papers, and embracing new teaching methods can sometimes be taxing. For those in admissions and advancement, weeks on the road visiting high schools or donors, making phone calls to recruit students or raise money can wear on you, just a bit. To maintenance and other college support staff, the behind-the-scenes work you do each day to make this college so

wonderfully run can feel tiresome, I'm sure.

But through Christ's death and resurrection all of this work can and should be done with joy and comfort and purpose. We have been called here together and have been given the opportunity to live in thankfulness for what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

Let's pursue our educational opus at Dordt College with imagination and cheer and, as we do so, people around us will notice that Christians at Dordt do amazing things and do them with joy. They will observe that Dordt's community is intriguingly and invitingly Christian, humbly and hospitably Reformed, and intellectually stimulating. We will continue to become, more and more, a flourishing Christian college community. Our educational opus will produce Christ followers, culture renewers, world shapers, community builders, difference makers.

The distinctive educational opus of Dordt College blends academic rigor and technical credibility with a biblical worldview integral to life and learning in every corner of our campus and beyond. Fewer and fewer colleges today can make the claim that they seek to be biblically serious, occupationally relevant, and thereby equip students as whole persons for service as disciples of Jesus Christ. But that is Dordt's educational opus and will continue to be so, God helping us.

Abraham Kuyper, whose thinking has helped give substance and shape to our opus here at Dordt, spoke eloquently of that invitation: "God's honor," he said, "requires the human spirit to probe the entire complexity of what has been created, in order to discover God's majesty and wisdom."

"The *Savior* of the world is also the *Creator* of the world," as Kuyper notes. "Therefore any view confining God's work to the small sector we might label 'church life' must be set aside.... That work encompasses the whole life of the world...and instead of monastic flight *from* the world the duty is now emphasized of serving God *in* the world, in every position in life."

This world is where we live and serve. Culture does matter. We are called to participate in culture in ways that become signposts of the coming kingdom of Christ, in ways that give glimpses of how things "ought to be," in ways that give glimpses of *shalom*.

That is our life's holy work, our opus.

Finishing where we started then, I offer you Paul's further words to the Philippians:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Love abounding in knowledge and deep insight. Engaging hearts and inquiring minds to better know and understand the world God created for us to steward and enjoy: that's a magnificent opus for a college such as ours.

As president, following in the formidable footprints of the Rev. B.J. Haan, Dr. J.B. Hulst, and Dr. Carl E. Zylstra, I hope to lead you faithfully in doing this work. I am indebted to these three for their faithful leadership in the past. They set the foundation for this place that we now inherit with a responsibility to grow and develop for God's glory.

I am grateful to each one of you for coming here today to celebrate God's continuing work at Dordt

The distinctive educational opus of Dordt College blends academic rigor and technical credibility with a biblical worldview integral to life and learning in every corner of our campus and beyond.

College. I encourage you to take comfort in the assurance that the work we do, the opus God has put in front of us, is already completed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We have come beyond the day of small beginnings. Our world and life view is pervasive. Our vision must be as large as our calling. Let the opus offered to God be our collective act of obedient service for the King.

Today, I encourage you to join the Educational Opus of Dordt College by moving up to the edge of your seat in eager expectation, ready and willing to live for him. Working alongside your brothers and sisters, may you become equipped more and more each day to work effectively for Christ-centered renewal in all areas of life.

As we do so together in the days and years ahead, I pray that God's will may be done, and his kingdom may come, here on earth more and more as it already is in heaven. And may any glory that comes from our opus go not to us, but only and always and solely, as our college motto states, to God alone.