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## Serious Education for Serious Christians

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**Editor's Note:** This paper is based on the Convocation Address given by Dr. Carl Zylstra at Dordt College on August 27, 2010.

# Serious Education for Serious Christians

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by Carl Zylstra

Maybe this is not the best question to ask as we begin a new academic year, but I'll ask it anyway: "Why do we bother?" Faculty have been gathered from far and wide. Staff have been hired from out of the best candidates possible. Students from all across the continent and around the world have packed up their laptops and their checkbooks and headed to Sioux Center. Friends and supporters by the tens of thousands have contributed by the millions to keep this college in operation for another year.

And so here we go. We have more freshmen than we've had for a decade. We have more trans-

fer students joining us than we've ever had. The rest of you have returned in percentages that are the envy of colleges all across the country. And so together, we start another academic year this week, and we might be forgiven for asking, appropriate or not, why we bother.

I've been prodded to ask that question afresh this year because during the past year, a contemporary author took Dordt College to task for what he considered a self-evidently silly conviction that everything we do on this campus should be shaped by the word of God and the biblical principles it reveals. In his book *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, Dr. David Van Drunen specifically singles out Dordt College's goal of shaping our recently established football program by the standards of biblical Reformed principles. Van Drunen doesn't bother to tell us what he believes is wrong with that vision; instead, he just recounts our commitment to a biblically shaped athletic competition, presumably because anyone who reads his reference would find the very thought to be as ludicrous as he does.

Now, we could just brush aside such critics. After all, not everyone holds to the principles enunciated back in 1933 by the dreamers who first envisioned Dordt College—that what we needed was, in their words, a "college which is not Christian simply in the sense that devotional activities are appended to the ordinary work of a college but a college in which all of the course work and all the student's intellectual, social, and imaginative activities will be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity."

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Carl Zylstra is President of Dordt College.

We know that of the 3500 baccalaureate institutions in the United States, not more than a couple of dozen would even want to make that claim. We're a little different that way—and we've always known that.

However, what makes Van Drunen's critique so intriguing is that he claims to be from the same biblical perspective as this college represents. He's a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in California, a seminary that professes to be dedicated better than most to the Reformed biblical tradition and understanding. And indeed, the burden of the book in which he makes his critique of Dordt College is to defend his contention that those of us who believe that every occupation in life and every social activity in which we engage should be governed by explicit biblical principles are ourselves the oddballs who really shouldn't claim to be Reformed at all. Or at minimum, we shouldn't insist that such a comprehensive application of biblical principles to all of life is at the heart of a Reformed understanding of God's world and our life in it.

As a result, when a presumptive friend makes such a charge, we'd better take it seriously—especially when he claims to understand so much better than we do what biblically shaped Reformed thinking is all about. We are a college that believes 24/7-living according to the standards of Christian community is what should be the goal of every believer. Van Drunen says that this goal is just plain silly and that, besides, it's not really all that Reformed.

So does he have a point? Shall we just pack up and go home, send you down the road to Iowa State, and let the taxpayers of the state of Iowa pick up the bill for your education? It sure would be a lot less work! Perhaps we should listen to Professor Van Drunen and examine whether he might not have a couple of lessons for us to learn. I want to credit him for making those points and pass them on today for our edification as we begin this year.

First, historically speaking, he is correct that not everyone has had the vision by which we were shaped from 1933 on. Many Reformed Christians have pretty much argued that education is for life in that other kingdom—the kingdom of common grace—which we share with all creatures on this planet. They have argued that such education is

hardly necessary for the kingdom of sanctified living, in which we, together with other believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, praise and honor our savior.

However, as I've already pointed out, we've always known that argument. In fact, this college was established precisely in order to be different from those who believed that a Christian college is simply devotional activities pasted onto the "ordinary life of a college." Dordt College is here because enough Christians disagreed with the idea that education for the ordinary life of the intellectual mind is good enough for Christian students. We are here because we believe that every aspect of the student's intellectual, social, and imaginative activities must be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity.

Perhaps it's because I came of intellectual age in the social-consciousness era of the '60s, that I found particularly offensive in Van Drunen's work his lauding of Reformed Christians in the American South who, in the nineteenth century, insisted vigorously that the word of God not be our standard for engagement in civic life. I say, I find that simply offensive because there was one very good historical reason that those Reformed Christians didn't want to engage common civic life with the pervasive power of biblical principles: they knew that if they did, they would have to confront the horrors and evils of slavery, and they were not about to take sides in that debate because they knew full well that if they did, on the basis of the word of God they would have to join the abolition crusade. But they were not willing to do, so they devised a wonderful theory of two kingdoms, where that kingdom to which slavery belonged was something they would just go along with even if they didn't believe it could be biblically justified.

So yes, historically speaking, not everyone from the Reformed tradition agrees with us that the word of God must govern every square inch of human culture—but, to put it bluntly, that's their problem, not ours. We have enough sins and failures of our own to keep us from being self-righteous about our stand. But when, by God's grace, we do get something right, let's not back down just because not everyone will go along with us.

I would, however, like to credit Van Drunen with pointing out a failure that is forgotten by

those of us who are dedicated to comprehensive Christian discipleship in engaging culture. Namely, in our eagerness to shape culture by the contours of our faith, we've sometimes let the opposite develop: our faith capitulates to the fads of contemporary culture.

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We have sometimes used the phrasing around here that what we want to do is "proclaim a God-centered culture." Isn't it odd, then, that our proclamation of that culture so often sounds a lot more like Rush Limbaugh, on the one hand, or Al Gore, on the other. If our idea of engaging the culture is simply to baptize the most trendy academic fad with a biblically phrased "Amen," we need to ask if we have really let our intellectual, social, and imaginative activity be permeated by the spirit and teaching of Christianity. If we as professors find our classes resembling the most recent secular workshop we attended, we have to ask if we are doing all we should. If our approach to campus life looks like a mirror of pretty much any small college we could find, we have to ask whether we've lived up to what we promised.

Van Drunen wisely cautions against what he sees as not only a danger but also a reality of a Christian triumphalism—Christians getting so excited about being invited to the table of the public square that they forget to stick to their own special diet, by which they were brought to that table, and forget to insist that others go on that special diet as well. If we are in such danger, we had better accept our critic's alternative and stop pretending that we have a special message to bring. Accepting our critic's alternative, we would concentrate on our own

Christian community and let the Lord sort out the cultural issues when he returns.

My problem—Dordt College's problem—however, is that the Bible doesn't seem to give us that option. It insists that even though we are not always good at living biblically, we are supposed to keep trying. Take one of my favorite verses of the Bible, Zechariah 14.20: "**On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar.**" What's that all about? In Exodus 28.34-36, when God gave instructions for worship in the tabernacle, he told his people to sew bells on the robe of the high priest. Aaron, the high priest, had to wear bells that clanged in praise to God as he entered the tabernacle. He also had to wear a seal that said, "HOLY TO THE LORD." That was the standard for worship when God's people got together—bells announcing and an inscription declaring that all was to be holy to the Lord.

However, the word of God says that the bells and inscription are not enough: we need a day when not just the priest wears bells that clang out glory to God, but even the draft horses that pull our farm wagons need to wear those bells so that our everyday activities—not just our church stuff—bring praise to God. Also, it won't just be gold plates, carried by the high priest, that say Holy to the Lord: our cooking pots, microwaves, and laptops will bring our offerings of praise to God.

In other words, Zechariah isn't going to let us off the hook by speaking of a special kingdom of God in church and a common kingdom of God that's pretty much the same for everyone. And I suppose in Zechariah's day, some people snidely commented on the silliness of thinking that the bells on the horses pulling the manure wagons had to bring the same praise to God as did the priests. I'm sure there were people living in Zechariah's day who hooted derisively at the thought that their home kitchen would be as holy to the Lord as the communion table in church. Here is the problem: Zechariah was speaking the Word of the Lord—and if others think us weird for believing what Zechariah said, that's just the way it is.

It's true: this kind of kingdom living hasn't all been accomplished yet. The Bible is clear, as

Revelation 11.15 states, that “the kingdom of this world already is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he will reign for ever and ever.” Yet not everyone follows that idea yet—and they won’t until, in the words of I Thessalonians 4, we are caught up to meet our Lord at his return and when, as Revelation 21 describes, he brings the new Jerusalem in all its completion with him.

Until that day, Dordt College’s responsibility, indeed the responsibility of all who join in that task, is not to give up in the middle of the process. To be fair to the author I have referenced today, I must add that he asks us to wait until his next book to hear how he believes two-kingdom ethics can shape our lives today. However, until he becomes more persuasive with his fundamental charge and complaint against those of us who want to shape all our activities by the spirit and teaching of our Lord, then the best thing to do is heed the cautions he raises, be modest about our claims as to where we stand in the course of intellectual history, and be thankful for the insights of those who have pushed beyond “sidelines Christianity” to fully culturally-engaged efforts to witness to the coming kingdom of Jesus Christ.

In other words, what we’re about in this place is serious education for serious Christians. This is tough work, and we don’t always succeed in bringing every thought captive to Jesus Christ. But with all the seriousness in the world, that is what we need to do.

Ours is serious education. We have a lot to learn about God’s world. We have a lot to learn about our place in it. And we have a lot to do to prepare for a lifetime of serving him in every aspect of our lives, in every dimension of human culture, and in every corner of his world. That’s serious business, and serious education results.

Or, maybe I should say that what we do is seriously Christian education. This isn’t just education with a Christian nameplate slapped on top the way a manufacturer might put a different brand name on a washer or drier, when you know that underneath, the machines are really all the same. We need education that is pervasively Christian—from the recital hall to the science lab and from the library to the residence hall. Anything less than that won’t be worthy of the engraved slogan Zechariah said

should be on all our possession: “holy to the lord.” Or, as the words of our college motto promise, and as everything on this campus proclaims—from notebooks to business cards to programs—all we do we will do for the glory of God alone.

Those who were here for chapel on Wednesday remember the challenge we received—to acknowledge and confess that Jesus really is our Lord—because seriously Christian education really only works when carried out by serious Christians, who do it for the honor of the one they know has saved them and who now owns them in covenant love for all eternity. For that reason, we require that our faculty and staff alike give testimony that they really are serious Christians, and for that reason we have invited students here, so that you can join us on that journey as a serious Christian seriously serving your redeemer and Lord.

So let us begin this year together. Let’s not get hung up when others carp and snipe. Let’s just carry on, knowing just whose kingdom we serve today and whose kingdom we are preparing to serve even more fully in a lifetime to come. Serious education awaits us this year. It is our privilege to join with the legion of serious Christians on this campus to make sure that this year will involve seriously Christian education in every respect. That education will include theology, but it will also include chemistry. It will include orchestra, and it will include intramurals. It will include Bible study, and it will include the study of history and philosophy. And yes, no matter what the critics may think, it will include our football teams as well.

Indeed, with this convocation, the whistle blows, and the kick off to the new year is underway. Let us make sure we play, think, study, and dream every moment this year in obedience to the one Lord and for the goal of his coming kingdom. This is serious business, but it is also joyful business because it is the Lord’s business.

The Old Testament prophet was right: everything now must be marked “Holy to the Lord.” May that be a reality at Dordt College for the 2010-2011 academic year. Our only task is that we live up to what the word of God proclaims and that what we have said, we will do. *Soli Deo Gloria*—to God alone be all the glory.