

Bailey Helps Students Interpret Their World

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CAMPUS KUDOS

Dordt is the highest-ranked university in Iowa, according to the "Regional Universities (Midwest)" ranking released by 2022-23 U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges. Out of 166 institutions included in the "Regional Universities (Midwest)" ranking, Dordt tied for ninth with Augustana University (South Dakota) and Otterbein University (Ohio). Dordt is ahead of Iowa institutions such as University of Northern Iowa (tied No. 17) and Northwestern College (tied No. 26). Dordt is second among institutions in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, including Calvin University (No. 4), Cedarville University (tied No. 15), and University of Northwestern-St. Paul (tied No. 39). Dordt is the highest-ranked institution within the Great Plains Athletic Conference as well.

Dordt's theatre arts program received a prestigious Gilchrist Foundation grant to support a theatre workshop and guest performance by esteemed actor and Dordt alumnus Jason Vande Brake ('00) in the spring 2023 production of Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House." Professor of Theatre Arts Laurel Koerner ('06) and Vande Brake will take on the lead roles in the show, with students working alongside them in other roles and as acting apprentices.



Vande Brake

Lucy Borkowski spent last summer raising awareness regarding the PLN genetic mutation, which can cause heart arrhythmias and possible cardiac death in people of Frisian descent. Borkowski will conduct her senior research biology project on this public issue. She is also being funded to continue her work through the PLN Heart Foundation.

Danae Westra, an agriculture education major, has been selected as a national finalist for the American Star in Agriscience by the National FFA Organization. The American Star Awards recognizes FFA members who "have gone above and beyond in their attitude, involvement, community service, and supervised agriculture experience."



D. Westra

Anika Homan, a math major, completed an eight-week National Security Agency (NSA)-funded summer research experience at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. Recently, she presented the work she and her research partner did in a poster at MathFest with the Mathematical Association of America, where they were awarded the outstanding poster designation for their work and presentation. Only the top 10-15% of posters receive this designation.

Katie Bush, an agriculture education major, has been selected as one of 12 students to serve as a 2022-23 National Teach Ag Ambassador by the National Association of Agricultural Educators.



Katie Bush

BAILEY HELPS STUDENTS INTERPRET THEIR WORLD

Associate Professor of Theology Dr. Justin Bailey was inspired to write his latest book, *Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture*, partly because he was looking for a resource to use for his Christianity and Popular Culture class.

"There are a lot of books that deal with Christian engagement with culture, but they either are too specific or are overly general, concerned with not being conformed to 'the culture' in the abstract," explains Bailey. "I wanted a book that split the difference—a book that didn't date itself through frequent references to pop cultural artifacts that might be passé as soon as the book came out, but also a book that modeled concrete cultural interpretation through different lenses."

The result is *Interpreting Your World*, a book that explores five dimensions of culture including meaning, power, morality, religion, and aesthetics. The book, which was released by Baker Academic in September, is intended to help readers recognize the ways culture shapes our perspectives as they learn "to engage culture with greater fluency and fidelity in response to the triune God." Bailey has a similar goal for his class.

Bailey has taught Christianity and Popular Culture three times, and each time he's had his students provide feedback on drafts of *Interpreting Your World*. This semester, though, students are required to read the book. Bailey made the book available on reserve at the Hulst Library, and he's offered to students who can't afford to purchase the book that he will give them a copy.

Students say they enjoy getting to learn from the author of their course textbook.

"I think it provides more depth and context to the book and the course," says Elanor Gesch, a biology major. "When we discuss topics, they directly tie to the chapter and vice versa, which gives us more to think about and questions to ask."

Christianity and Popular Culture is a popular class, not only because it fulfills a core requirement for students but because of the subject matter.

JAMIN VERVELDE ('99)



Dr. Justin Bailey is the author of *Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture*.

"I have really appreciated the fact that we are taking something that many people might think is superficial or frivolous and taking a close look at it," says Jemmie Dyk, an environmental studies major. "Popular culture is all around us and is shaping us whether we like it or not. I think it is awesome that we have the opportunity to think deeply about how this connects to our faith in a discussion-based class like this."

As they examine the relationship between Christian faith and popular culture, the class considers critical theory and cultural studies as well as sketches a theological account, rooted in the reformational emphasis on creation, fall, redemption, and renewal.

We ask, 'What are some distinctly Christian approaches to culture? And does it reflect flourishing?'" says Bailey. "The whole class is shaped by a reformational perspective. The idea of worldview and looking through lenses to see what's going on and how that's distinctive is very reformational. I want them to listen carefully to name what's good and to give thanks to God for what's good, but I also want them to be discerning – to say, 'What are the ways in which this is reflecting a different vision of what the world is like than the one we see in Scripture?'"

Bailey incorporates TV shows, movies, and music into his curriculum as well.

"I want students to have real-time engagement with popular culture. We tend to have two settings when it comes to pop culture: either complete amusement, where you shut your mind off, or dismissive critique, where you count the number of times something egregious was done," says Bailey. "I am trying to fall somewhere in-between and find pieces of culture that are enjoyable but also require some critique."

When taking in pop culture artifacts like TV shows or movies, students are asked to apply one of five lenses: meaning, power, morality, religion, and aesthetics. That's had a positive impact on Daniel Ketchelos, a digital media major who is thankful for



"This course gets students to think critically about what pop culture we consume, how we engage with it, and whether we are doing these things Christianly," says Elanor Gesch.

how Bailey has provided different lenses for engaging pop culture.

"I've especially appreciated his approach to how as Christians we should not abandon culture but seek to understand the importance of culture and how to engage with it from a Christian perspective," he says. "If we abandon culture, then we have no hope of influencing the popular narrative that is forming in our society. As Christians we are called to bring light to the world, but if we don't speak the language then it will be hard to bring light to those who need it."

Logan Van Itallie, an engineering major, appreciates the wide view Bailey takes when discussing pop culture and that the class doesn't just emphasize one medium.

"Bailey takes care to understand and incorporate many different genres and styles of pop culture, from Taylor Swift's music to Marvel movies, to many references to The Office. This has

helped me be engaged and understand more broadly the points he makes."

Nobody lives in a vacuum, adds Van Itallie.

"We're all immersed in pop culture, and it

is important to think critically about how we engage with the world. Studying pop culture and its effects on our behavior can help enable critical thinking. The concepts of theology, which can also be found in pop culture, can help us to understand what the world is thinking about Christians and how we may engage more productively with those around us."

We're all cultural beings who are deeply invested in culture, whether we realize it or not, Bailey notes.

"It's very hard to avoid culture. For example, we speak a language and wear clothes—all forms of expressing culture," says Bailey. "Popular culture is this unique species of culture that has been formed by mass media, reflecting the values of entertainment and people with platforms and celebrity. It's powerful and present, which is why we need to be sensitive about the way it's shaping us and find ways to contribute that will glorify God. If you're going to live in a society that's media saturated, you can either shut yourself off from all of it, or you can say, 'I'm going to be discerning, thoughtful, and engaged in the way that I consume or relate to pop culture.'"

Engaging culture, says Bailey, requires tools—tools that he is trying to give the students in his Christianity and Popular Culture class and readers through his book *Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture*.

SARAH MOSS ('10)

BUY BOOK

To purchase a copy of *Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture*, visit bookstore.dordt.edu.

