

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 37 | Number 1

Article 3

---

September 2008

## Dordt Convocation Address: Spring 2007

Duane Litfin

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Litfin, Duane (2008) "Dordt Convocation Address: Spring 2007," *Pro Rege*:

Vol. 37: No. 1, 13 - 17.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol37/iss1/3](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol37/iss1/3)

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

## Dordt Convocation Address Spring 2007

---



by Duane Litfin

**T**hank you, Mr. President, for your gracious introduction. And to the distinguished board members and faculty who are gathered here, and all the other guests and students, I want to say thank you for the honor of addressing you. It is genuinely a delight to be at Dordt and to see what you folks are doing out here in Iowa. I have not been on this campus before, but I am of course well aware of your work. I thank you for providing me this opportunity for a visit.

In my role as a college president I've learned to take seriously one of the great principles of life. It goes like this: "If the horse is dead—dismount."

---

Dr. Duane Litfin is President of Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

Too often we find ourselves unwilling to let go of something even though it has finished its useful life. But that's almost always a bad idea. If a horse has died on us, we should give it a dignified burial and move on.

Today I want to raise with you the question of whether this may not be the case with our well-worn phrase "the integration of faith and learning." Increasingly we hear people talking about the integration of faith and learning as a dead horse. Is it time to dismount?

Let me say at the outset that I am not convinced that "the integration of faith and learning" is a dead horse. The phrase, to be sure, is an incomplete one. Neal Plantinga has written a wonderful little book entitled *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning and Living*, in which he gets at some broader issues. He alerts us to the fact that "faith and learning" alone do not capture the entire task of a Christian. But our phrase does, I think, get at a core set of issues regarding the *intellectual* task of a Christian, which is the reason I am disinclined to see it abandoned. The matters it addresses, it seems to me, are by no means dead.

The critics of the notion of integration represent various voices. One of these voices, of course, is the secular critic who seeks to hearken back to the classical Humeian distinction between facts and values, between objects and subjects. This critic basically wants to keep these two things compartmentalized. Religion belongs on the value side, while all matters of reason and science belong on the fact side. And never the twain shall meet. Keep them hermetically sealed from one another, says this critic. This is a widely-held view in the Academy today because of

its capacity to defuse entirely any conflict between science and religion. But it does so only by exacting a very steep price from religion. And it eliminates altogether any ability to talk about an integrated worldview.

The fact/value divide is one source of criticism of our phrase, and it's a common one. But it's not the one I wish to address this morning. I am more interested in some of the critics from within the church. Theirs are the questions I want to address.

I think, for example, of voices within the Anabaptist tradition. All you have to do is read the book edited by Douglas and Rhonda Jacobson, *Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation*, and you discover immediately that some Anabaptist voices are quite unhappy with the notion of integration. Theirs is not so much an argument against it as a changing of the subject. It's not what we Anabaptists do, they seem to say. This "integration of faith and learning" business is a Reformed thing. But as you will see shortly, I do not think this is true. I do not think integration really is a Reformed thing; or perhaps we should say, it is not a *uniquely* Reformed thing. Thus, it appears to me to be a mistake to set the integrative task aside for any such reason.

A more fundamental critique springs from Lutheran quarters. Ernest Simmons, in his book *Lutheran Higher Education: An Introduction*, argues for a Lutheran two-kingdom approach that pretty much dispenses with integration. Simmons suggests that Lutherans are more comfortable with a "dialogical" relationship between faith and learning. This releases them, he says, from worrying unduly about the business of integration.

Then there are voices from other traditions. I think of Richard Hughes and his book *How the Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*. Professor Hughes is from a Church of Christ background, and he teaches in a Church of Christ institution. Yet as he examines the issues in this book, he winds up opting for a quasi-Lutheran view himself. He doesn't quite call it that, I think, but he is happier with the sort of compartmentalization that releases us from any pressure toward thinking integratively. At one point he cites with approbation a Lutheran who was teaching in a Reformed institution, who remarked, "When I first came to this school, I couldn't hook into this worldview business that everyone talked

about. At first I thought I was dumb. I finally decided I'm just Lutheran." Apparently Professor Hughes is unconvinced of the need to develop an integrated, worldview-ish perspective that seeks to comprehend the unity of faith and learning.

Even within Reformed circles, perhaps surprisingly, you can find critics of the notion of integration. For example, D. G. Hart, in his book *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education*, raises the question of why on earth secular institutions would have religious studies departments. He thinks religious studies at secular universities odd, and perhaps he's right. But Professor Hart also wrote an article in the *Christian Scholars Review* titled, "Christian Scholars, Secular Universities and the Problem with the Antithesis." There he resists setting secular thinking and Christian thinking in antithesis. He pretty much views the non-Christian as able to come, in very un-Kuyperian ways, to a fully adequate understanding of non-religious subjects. Why should we worry about trying to think Christianly about non-theological or non-religious subjects? That is the non-integrative question he seems to be raising.

What are we to make of such critics? Has the integrative horse died? Shall we dismount?

Now again, I want to insist at the outset that I am committed to a fully holistic approach to the Christian life. I believe such a life requires more than the integration of "faith and learning." Life is not simply an intellectual enterprise. The integration of faith, learning, and living involves bringing all of our faith and learning to bear upon how we live, upon our value system, upon what we say, what we don't say, where we go, what we do, how we do it. I am in fact passionate about this holistic understanding of things and preach it constantly on my own campus.

But our subject today is a more narrow one. I am addressing the Christian's *intellectual* task in particular. That's what we're focusing on when we use the phrase, "the integration of faith and learning." So, our question is, should we write this integrative task off as a dead horse?

As I have said, I, for one, am not willing to do so. In fact I would argue that the integrative task is not only not dead but alive and well and needed today more than ever. And it is decidedly not just a

Reformed task. It is a task that belongs to everyone who names the name of Jesus Christ.

I myself am an unapologetic Calvinist. In fact, I sometimes find myself in trouble for being so pronounced a Calvinist. But I do not believe that the integration of faith and learning is somehow rooted in my Calvinism. Indeed, I believe we should resist that notion. The integrative task grows out of some-

---

*The integrative task grows out of something that is the property of every Christian: the affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.*

---

thing that is the property of *every* Christian: the affirmation of *the Lordship of Jesus Christ*. The Apostle Paul informs us that no one can exclaim “Jesus Christ is Lord” except by the Spirit. He is referring, of course, not merely to the mouthing of these words but to their heartfelt confession. *Jesus Christ is Lord!* It is the central claim of all members of Christ’s body, whatever their ecclesiastical tradition.

What are we affirming when we affirm the lordship of Jesus Christ? If we step back and allow the Scriptures to fill out our understanding of what this means, we discover perhaps the most profound affirmation any human being can make. Trace through the biblical data—a task we cannot undertake here this morning, but I will briefly summarize it—and we discover that the Father has placed the Son, the Second Person of the Godhead, at the very center of the created order. He is the Creator of all things, says the Apostle in Colossians 1. Further, he is the Sustainer of all things, the One who holds all things together. Further yet, he is the Goal of all things—somehow everything that exists is groaning toward its eschatological fulfillment in him. What’s more, he is the Redeemer of all things, the one who was designated by the Father to become part of this broken world, to take upon himself flesh so that he might live and die to redeem it. We are talking here of the Second Person of the Godhead, the Alpha

and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the One in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily. He it is whom the Father has made central to the universe. This is what we are affirming when we make the claim that “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Does such a claim slight the Father or the Spirit? Of course not. There are those who when they hear the claim of “Christ-centered education” sometimes reply, “Wait a moment; we’re Trinitarian—we believe in three eternal, co-equal Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We must give equal time to the Father and the Spirit.”

But this response is unnecessary. It is by the Father’s design that the Son should have “preeminence in all things,” says the Apostle. The Father is the very one who has placed the Son at center stage. What’s more, John 14 reveals that it is the Spirit’s task, not to draw attention to himself but to show us the Son. It is therefore scarcely a slight of the Father or the Spirit to focus on the Son. It delights the Father when we do so, and the Spirit has come to enable us to do that very thing.

Like some of us, the disciples made the mistake of missing this point. They said to Jesus, “We seem to see you well enough. But please, will you show us the Father?” And for this Jesus rebuked them. “Have I been so long with you,” he asked, “and still you do not understand? When you see me, you are seeing the Father.” What Jesus was saying is that he does not *eclipse* the Father and the Spirit—he *reveals* them.

The teaching of the New Testament is that the Son stands at the core of everything we can know or experience. Jesus occupies center stage of the universe. All of the fullness of the Godhead dwells in him. This is the central message of Scripture, and it is the testimony of the Church throughout its entire history.

When we speak of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, then, this is what we are—or at least, what we should be—talking about. Yet so often when Christians speak about Jesus as Lord, they reduce it to the personal matter of making Jesus “Lord of *my* life.” Now, to be sure, we must all come to that. But this is not where we must begin. Why does Jesus deserve to be Lord of our lives? Because he is the Lord of the universe! That’s why he has the right to claim Lordship over *my* life.

This sort of high Christology is what makes it possible for us to seek an organizing, integrating center to all we can know or experience. There is nothing in the universe that is irrelevant to Jesus Christ, and there is nothing to which he is irrelevant. Every aspect of our lives, every part of our learning, and every dimension of our experience is related to him and is of concern to him. There is nothing we can conjure up of which Jesus Christ would say, "I have no interest in that." As the Creator of all things, the one who holds all things together, the one who became part of the creation by taking upon himself our flesh so that he could redeem it and deliver it in perfection to the Father, Jesus Christ stands at the center of all we can know.

Unfortunately, not all Christians appear to understand this claim. Their Christology seems far too small. A generation ago, J.B. Phillips wrote a little book titled *Your God is Too Small*. He argued that for many Christians, their understanding of God is too limited. In the same way, I have come to think that for many Christians, their Jesus may be too small.

I recall, for example, a conversation with the president of a well-known Christian College. We were conversing with a group of Christian college presidents, and I made the point that Christology lies at the center of what we do in the world of Christian higher education. I still remember the silence that comment engendered. It just hung there for a moment, and then the conversation moved on to something else. I remember feeling I must have expressed the point very poorly because no one had picked up on it.

Later that day, however, we were going to dinner with one of these presidents, and somehow this subject came up again. At this point this president said to me, "Actually, I don't agree with that." Somewhat taken aback, I said, "You don't agree with it? What's not to agree with?" "Well," he said, "we are a Christian liberal arts college. We study all of life and learning and experience," and he launched into his liberal arts speech. It's the same speech all of us liberal arts college presidents must give on a regular basis, a speech that valorizes the entire range of human learning and experience we attempt to explore together. Then he concluded, "If we were a Bible college, or a seminary, this kind of focus on Jesus might work. If we're talking about salvation,

the Christian life, ministry, fine. But ours is a liberal arts college, and such a narrow focus just won't do."

What dawned upon me as I listened to this friend was a sobering realization. When I spoke of Christology, what this president of a well-known Christian liberal arts college heard me saying was, "Jesus died for me on the cross." For him, that view would be fine if we were thinking about such things as evangelism, Christian living, or ministry. But such a slim support would never be able to bear the weight of the full depth and breadth of a liberal arts curriculum.

As it turned out, this man's Christology was pretty much limited to Jesus' work on the cross as our Sin-Bearer. In one sense, of course, this view is unproblematic: the cross summarizes it all. We are cross-centered people if we are biblical people, and I would never argue for displacing the cross from its rightful place. But what this president seemed to be missing—and what it is utterly crucial that we keep before us—is *who it was* who was hanging on that Roman cross. Nailed to that cross was not simply our Redeemer. Dying on that cross was no one less than the very Creator of the universe, the one who holds all things together by his Word, the one toward whom all the universe is straining. Can we possibly understand the cosmic significance of what was taking place on that cross if we do not grasp that?

What I'm arguing for is this fuller biblical understanding of who Jesus is, because once we understand that, everything changes. No truncated understanding of Jesus can bear the weight of an entire worldview. But a fully biblical understanding of who Jesus is makes an integrated worldview not only possible but also necessary.

Christian scholarship is not merely scholarship done by Christians. It is scholarship which is Christ-centered. It is not merely "religious" work or "faith based" work or generically theistic work. To be distinctively Christian, our work must be Trinitarian, focusing on the person of Christ. We are always working our way through, trying to think our way through, to the person of Christ, who by the Father's design stands at the center of all we can know or experience. Until we think our way through to him, whatever we're studying will remain, from a Christian point of view, incomplete.

How do we do that? We do it in an infinite range

of ways, depending on what we are studying. I do not presume to understand even a fraction of these ways, of course; though if we had the time today, we could explore at least some illustrations. But with such limited time I must settle for simply stressing the principle. There is no thing we can study that has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. There is no dimension of our lives or learning to which he would point and say, "I am irrelevant to that." The Centerpiece of the universe, Jesus Christ, is relevant to every conceivable thing in that universe. In fact, he is *Lord over it all*. Wrestling our way towards this dimension of whatever we are studying is the unique task of the Christian scholar.

What, then, is Christ-centered education? It is an education that seeks to ask and answer, throughout every nook and cranny of the curriculum or co-curriculum, this question: What difference does it make here, for this aspect of our lives or learning, that we make the stupendous claim, "Jesus Christ is Lord"? However varied our answers must be to that question, one response is not available to us, namely, that it makes no difference at all. The Lordship of Jesus Christ leaves nothing untouched.

This is why I say we should resist the notion that the integrative horse is dead—because this horse remains very much alive. Thinking integratively is a task no Christian can escape. It is not just a Reformed thing, not just a Calvinistic thing. It is for all who claim Jesus as Lord, provided that we mean by this affirmation what the Scriptures mean.

Seeking to explore what this central affirmation of our faith—"Jesus Christ is Lord"—means for every dimension of our learning is the essence of the slogan "the integration of faith and learning." How could a full-bodied biblical Christology permit anything less? What is it, after all, that constitutes the Christian intellectual task? Is it not, in the end, "to take every thought captive to Christ"? Is not the center of our entire curriculum, and indeed our very lives, the person of our Lord? Is it not our ongoing task to wrestle—however feebly and inadequately, but also faithfully—with the question of what difference it makes at every point, at every moment, for every aspect of our lives or learning, that we claim Jesus as Lord? We mustn't accept that it makes no difference at all, that somehow what we are addressing at some particular moment has nothing to do

with Him. That cannot be true. Everything has to do with Him. Our only questions are how and in what way. Within disciplines and between disciplines, the answers will be greatly varied and complex, and at our best we will merely scratch their surface. How could it be otherwise? But we must not let the feebleness of our efforts put us off from trying. This is what a Christ-centered education is about. It's about honing in on the person of the Lord

---

*What, then, is Christ-centered education? It is an education that seeks to ask and answer, throughout every nook and cranny of the curriculum or co-curriculum, this question: What difference does it make here, for this aspect of our lives or learning, that we make the stupendous claim, "Jesus Christ is Lord?"*

---

Jesus Christ, ever growing in our understanding of what His Lordship means for how we understand all of our lives and learning together.

This is why I refuse to say that this horse is dead or to allow the integrative task to be relegated merely to the Reformed community. This sort of integration is built into what it means to be a Christian. It is what we are trying to do in every area of our lives, including our Christian scholarship. It is the responsibility of every Christian—everyone, that is, who espouses that most profound affirmation of which human language is capable: *Jesus Christ is Lord!*