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“What’s a Dordt?”¹



by John B. Hulst

This strange question was asked of me in 1988 by a reporter during half-time of Dordt’s quarter finals game of the NAIA basketball tournament in Kansas City. Dordt was not as well known then, but our team was doing very well. In fact, our group of enthusiastic but well-behaved supporters was, by far, the largest at the tournament. Still, we had that funny name, Dordt College—a name which I like very much, by the way. That strange name, our obscurity, and our competitive team compelled a press reporter to approach me in the stands for an interview. The following morning an article appeared on the front page of the sports section of the *Kansas City Star*. The headline read, “What’s a Dordt?” The article contained my answer as well as other information about the col-

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lege and the team.

“What’s a Dordt?” is a strange but important question. It was important then, and it is important today, especially during this time of celebration. I learned the importance quite early in my presidency, during another time of celebration. The same year that we went to the NAIA tournament, we received our first ranking in the *U.S. News and World Report*. I was delighted, of course, and went to share my joy with Dr. Ribbens, Vice President for Academic Affairs at that time. Dr. Ribbens is a person to whom Dordt College owes a great debt of gratitude, but on this occasion I was upset with him. When I told him the good news about our ranking, he said, “I don’t want to talk about it, John. *U.S. News and World Report* doesn’t understand the principles according to which we evaluate ourselves.” He was wrong in what he said. The ranking was something to celebrate. He was also right in what he said. When celebrating, we must remember to ask, “What’s a Dordt?”

About two miles north of campus, on Highway 75, there is a sign reading, “Dordt College: Agriculture Stewardship Center,” indicating that Dordt College has a place where, primarily through its Agriculture Department, it seeks to learn and to teach how to care for land, animals, and plants—all part of God’s creation. It is a good place, an important place, a special place—the Agriculture Stewardship Center. (In this connection I’m pleased to see that the College’s new master plan includes the development of a “meadowlands” in the southeast part of the main campus. This is evidence of ongoing stewardly sensitivity, appropriate in this year of celebration for which we have used the biblical concept of Jubilee.)

Today, though, I am proposing that an additional sign be made. It should be placed on cam-

pus, not necessarily at the Century Farmstead but perhaps right in front of the Campus Center. It should read, “Dordt College: A Stewardship Center.” Why? Because Dordt College not only *has* a Stewardship Center but also *is* a Stewardship Center. If it isn’t, it should be.

The Greek word for “steward” is *οικονομος*, from which we get our word “economics.” It means “manager of the household.” The Bible teaches that we, all of us, are stewards, i.e., managers of God’s household, God’s creation.

Some of what I am about to say may sound a bit familiar. In fact, I *hope* it sounds familiar. It is the old, old story of creation, fall, redemption, consummation, a story I love to tell. From this point on, it may seem as if I am preaching a sermon, which reminds me of a reported conversation between Samuel Coleridge and his friend Charles Lamb. Coleridge asked Lamb, “Have you ever heard me preach, Charles?” Lamb responded, “I’ve never heard you do anything else.” Those who know me might say the same thing.

The old, old story tells us that in the beginning, God **created** His household, brought His creation into being. He also created man and woman. He created them in His image and placed them in the midst of His household. To enjoy it? Indeed, but also to be stewards, or managers, of His household. The household, the creation, was His. He made it and governed it. It belonged to Him, but the man and the woman were to manage it for Him, care for it according to His Word.

In order to manage God’s household, the man and woman were called to study, examine, and understand the creation. For example, when God first made man, He brought all the animals to him. As man came to understand the nature of each animal, he gave it a fitting name. The man and woman were further told to dress the creation and keep it. Understanding and insight were required, but that insight was to be “serviceable” in managing and caring for the household. Created in the image of God, the man and woman were capable—they had the God-given talents needed to fulfill their call to stewardship.

Eventually, though, the stewards of the household **fell** into sin. Tempted by Satan, they disobeyed the Word of God that was to direct them.

They forgot that the house belonged to God; they claimed the house for themselves. They continued to work in the house and care for it, but they did so in satisfaction of their own desires, not as stewards in the service of God.

As a result, the judgment of God fell on both the stewards and the household. The consequences were immediately evident in conflict—conflict between themselves and God, between themselves as husband and wife, and between themselves and the rest of creation (Genesis 3:8-24). The results were eventually seen in the sons of Cain: they raised livestock, played harp and flute, and forged all kinds of tools in the service of themselves, not in the service of God (Genesis 4:19-24).

Further, the effects of this human disobedience, and God’s judgment upon it, are with us to this very day. The effects are seen in the *elements* of creation—damage to the ozone layer, contamination of water above and below the ground, destruction of forests and animal habitats, extinction of species of plants and animals, and toxic materials injected into soil, air, and water. The effects are also seen in the *structures* of creation—marriage is under attack, family relationships are strained and broken, education is corrupted, churches are proclaiming “bad news” instead of “good news,” industry is wasting resources, corporations and customers are driven by greed, mass-produced ugliness is presented as art, horrible noises are called music, and whole cultures are being displaced, relocated, or extinguished.

However, God was not about to just watch this and to leave His household, His creation, in this situation. He didn’t create it for this purpose; He didn’t intend that His household be left in shambles. Therefore, in the fullness of time, God sent His Son into the world to **redeem** His household, His creation. Actually, God sent His Son into the world as a suffering Servant, as a suffering *Steward*, to reclaim and restore the creation to its original goodness. It is also appropriate to speak of Christ’s death and resurrection as “re-creation,” not that the original creation is discarded—God never abandons the work of His hands—but that holding on to the original creation, in covenantal faithfulness, God re-creates it through Christ.

When Christ came to earth, He *exemplified* the

restoration of the creation, not only by His words but also by His works, His miracles. One day the disciples of John the Baptist came to Him and asked, “Are you the one we’re looking for?” He responded, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, men who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11:4, 5). His miracles are demonstrations that He had come to restore a fallen, damaged household, including its needy, poor, and destitute. Further, He *accomplished* the restoration of creation by His death and resurrection, which we celebrate not only on Easter but also on the first day of every week. By His death and resurrection, He bore the penalty of sin; He fulfilled all the re-

It is now our task, as His stewards, to bring that redemption to expression, to promote renewal and restoration in every part of the creation.

quirements of the law; and He restored the entire creation, all things in heaven and on earth, to the Father. Thus He redeemed, bought back, His entire household. It is His again.

Prior to His ascension, His leave-taking, Christ called His disciples to Him and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20). He said, in other words, “This is my household. I am in charge, but before I leave, I commission you to manage it and take care of it for me. And I will be with you to help you.” This was a mandate, a commission, for His disciples then and for His disciples, His followers, now, with the assurance that He is and will be with us all the way until the work is finished.

It is sometimes suggested that it is our calling, in Christ, to redeem the creation. Not so! It is only

Christ who can and does redeem. It is now our task, as His stewards, to bring that redemption to expression, to promote renewal and restoration in every part of the creation. Our redemption is a recall to stewardship—a truth that has implications for all of us gathered here this morning.

This truth has implications, first, for the college and its world view. We must avoid a world view that speaks of a rapture that will free us from this cursed earth, that refers to this planet as a “foreign strand,” that allows us to wink at the rape of any part of the creation order because “heaven is my home,” and that accepts the *status quo*. We must instead promote a world view that acknowledges Christ as reconciler of all things, “things in heaven or on earth” (Colossians 1:16), and a world view that understands that we have a ministry of reconciliation in every part of creation, a ministry that involves opposing the spirits of the age and promoting that which heals, is just, and brings peace.

This truth has implications, second, for the faculty, not simply those involved in environmental studies, but all faculty—faculty in the so-called humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences alike. Our stewardship involves the entire creation. As we have already indicated, working and caring for the creation depends on insight. Therefore, faculty members as educators must study, examine, and understand the creation; and the results of that study must be passed on from one generation of students to another.

That is the faculty’s task and calling. Through study and research, faculty are to understand their field—agronomy or music, physics or sociology, botany or political science. Through study in light of the Word, they are to understand how each part of the household was *formed* at creation, was *deformed* through the fall, was *redeemed* through the redemptive work of Christ, and is to be *reformed* through His stewardly representatives. Through teaching, faculty are to share the results of their understanding with their students—as models of stewardship in their disciplines, from music, about which Karen De Mol has written in *Sound Stewardship*, to physical education and athletics, including football if the College should decide to go in that direction.

The re-call to stewardship has implications for students as well. Students are being educated,

trained *as stewards*, for stewardship. Students are stewards now of their studies, seeking to understand God's creation and their particular area of interest in it. Students are also being trained *for stewardship*. Students are often told that they are not in college simply to be trained for a job. That's true. But, in another sense, that's exactly why students are in college—to be trained for the job of steward, of caring for a room in God's household, a part of God's creation. Doing so, students are to understand that their talents, their gifts, are God-given. There is no place for pride among students or faculty, only place for gratitude to Him. Students are to understand that their area of interest is God's. They don't own anything. Everything is His, and so are students. Students are to understand that their task, along with that of their professors, is to investigate their area of interest and to prepare for caring for it, i.e., opposing what is wrong and developing what is right. Finally, students are to understand that when they graduate, they are to work with others in actually caring for one of the rooms in the household. They are to do this, of course, as His stewards, His servants, always according to His Word—not simply fitting in but as agents of renewal.

Finally, we should know that the Master of the household will **return** to complete what He has begun. It is true that He has already come. We work always in His presence, either obediently or disobediently. One day, however, the Master of the household will return to “settle accounts” (Matthew 25: 19) with His stewards—something like a final exam. What will some of the questions be? Will He ask, “Do these people confess me as Savior and Lord?” I'm sure he will ask that. “Do they engage regularly in devotional and worship activity?” Of course! That is very important. “Are they—in research, teaching, study—diligent in the exercise and development of their gifts and talents?” Indeed! He is obviously interested in what we are doing with the talents He has given us. Ultimately, He is going to ask, “Have these people been faithfully using their gifts and talents to manage, to care for my house? Have they been opposing that which defiles my house? Have they been promoting that which blesses my house?”

We know that all this will happen because of

the story, the parable, that Jesus told in Matthew 25. Actually I have been retelling that story throughout this convocation address; but now we come to the end of the story, when the Master of the Household returns. He is displeased with the one-talent servant and says, “You wicked, lazy servant!” (Matthew 25:26). Why is the Master so harsh? Because He observed that the third servant resented Him and His sovereign authority. The third servant was embittered by his position as the Master's servant, feeling that he was being exploited. He refused to admit that everything he possessed had come from the Master and that he was to use his gift and talent in caring for the Master's house. He wanted to own something and use it to succeed, to advance himself, and to satisfy his selfish greed.

The Master is upset with the third steward? Indeed! Not only because that steward has been selfish and disobedient but also because he hasn't been taking care of his part of the household. The Master has come back to complete the work of renewal, but this servant has done nothing to contribute to that work. In fact, he has hindered it. As a result, the Master says, “Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30).

On the other hand, the Master is pleased with the five-talent and two-talent servants and says to each of them, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things” (Matthew 25:21, 23). He says this not only because they have been selfless and obedient but also because they have taken care of His household. The Master has come back to complete the work of re-creation, and He is delighted with what these servants have done to contribute to that work. As a result, he says, “Come and share your master's happiness!” (Matthew 25:21, 23).

What's a Dordt? It has been many years since I've been asked that question. You have just heard what I believe the answer should be. But how would you respond as college, faculty, and students?

I was delighted to hear Dr. Rockne McCarthy say in a recent *Voice* interview, “As an institution we are committed to faithfulness” in being re-

formed and reforming. When the Master returns, and He will, that is what He wants to hear and see. He will want to hear us faithfully confessing and see us faithfully working together according to the words of Article 52 of the Contemporary Testimony, which I ask everyone to join me in reciting: “Grateful for the advances in science and technology, we make careful use of their products, on guard against idolatry and harmful research, and careful to use them in ways that answer to God’s demands to love our neighbor and to care for the earth and its creatures” because “Our World Belongs to God!”²

Endnotes

1. The convocation address was preceded by a dramatic reading of Matthew 25:14-30.
2. The convocation address was followed by the singing of Psalter Hymnal #611, “As Stewards of the Vineyard.”