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Temptation, Education, and Wisdom

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1985 graduates of Dordt College, faculty, president Hulst and all the administrators, secretaries, custodians, cooks and repair people, trustees, parents of the graduates, alumni, friends:

Studying at a sound college like Dordt does not necessarily make you a wise person, anymore than graduating from an orthodox seminary always makes you a humble, true prophet of the LORD. God's grace has to capture your heart, and the Holy Spirit has to dance in the classrooms to make your whole corporeal consciousness aware that Christ's

kingdom is acoming on this earth, in our woebegone history. When we come to experience that mysterious Rule of the LORD over things, amid our routine, in our playful moments, and in our troublesome uncertainties, then we have the beginnings of wisdom. Without wisdom we are no good to God, no matter if you had a four-year scholarship to medical school. When our ordinary life does breathe wisdom, then whatever we do is worthwhile, for keeps.

But wisdom is the third point in this commencement address. Let me take the first point first, and talk about Dordt: temptation.

Temptation

An American college education is a stepping stone for your advancement in life. Your B.A. or B.S. degree, once you walk across this platform, is a ticket for a job in society that sets you apart from the crowd that only made it through high school. You may not be very skilled labor at this point, but the Dordt College training you have honorably completed has opened up for you the possibility of a career in teaching, business, theatre, church ministry, medicine, law, social work, laboratory science, government service, or what not. You can become a professional. Unlike a farmhand or factory worker, as a professional you gain enormous authority in our society, often out of all proportion to what you are as a person. A professional secretary in an office where you need to get a license for something has tremendous administrative power, to say nothing about the professional anesthetist who puts you to sleep at your surgery, or the professional lawyer who takes your case or you to court. Dordt College is handing over to you today a coupon for becoming a professional—that's a fact. It may also be the greatest temptation you face in your life: to join the yuppies (young, upwardly mobile professionals) in our society.

"Now wait a minute!" you say. "Our Christian college training at Dordt in my major has taught me a measure of competence in a field, and in between the lines has also made plain that for me to live by talent, merit, and achievement, for promotion, prestige, and what money can buy, would be idolatry! I don't intend to follow the Emersonian sermons on 'Self-reliance.' I know that the 'American dream' of Benjamin Franklin

Early to bed, early to rise,
makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise
has become an American nightmare inciting envy around the world; and Franklin's motto in reality is the fine print on the back side of our dollar bills where it says, 'In God We Trust.'

"It's true, my parents want me to succeed, and it's time I moved off on my own to earn my daily bread and pay off my student loans; but there's nothing unchristian about that! I realize

the spot commercials which we all allow to constantly interrupt television news and programs are one blatant lie and appeal to greed and shameless pleasure, but it won't brainwash me into becoming a watered-down, Christianized version of a middle-class yuppie...."

Good. However, it's still important to underline the serious temptation of this wonderful occasion when all of God's graduating children at Dordt get robes, like the sober figures in Flaxman's engraving. And we profs and dignitaries who have worn ceremonial robes for years owe it to you, to plead with you who will be replacing us as leaders among God's people not to wear your robes of privilege as we have often done, walking solemnly past the supreme hypocrite Caiphas like a crucified Christ flat on his back, our eyes averted as we proceed in sad self-congratulatory, false humility to do our professional thing, unaware of the least of our neighbors.

Temptation never advertises itself, because then the devil's invitation to sin or God's testing the quality of your faith loses precisely that element which makes the event tempting—an attractive, hidden quality of opportunity to do what is right and become wise, or to do what is wrong and be fooled. Temptation for Christians is often very refined; it sneaks up on you like carbon monoxide. The devil knows his customers, and God does not provoke us to sin, says the Bible (James 1:13-15), but God does stretch us at critical moments (for example, at a graduation) in the hope that we not get stuck in ruts of self-righteous respectability (James 1:2-4, 12, I Corinthians 10:12-13).

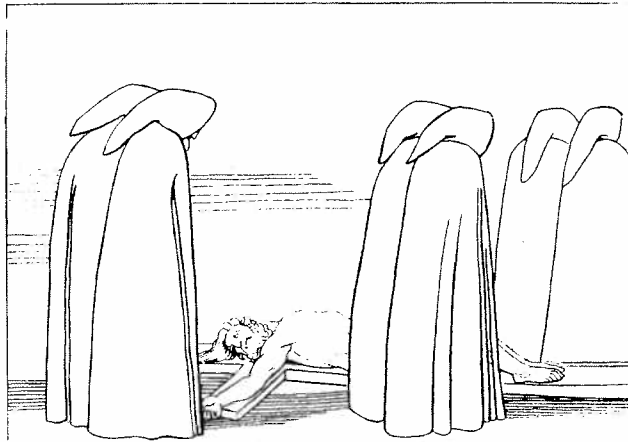
The temptation blowing in the wind today for you graduates, even with a two-year degree, is the temptation of self-centered ambition, pursued in the name of Christ, of course. The temptation is now yours to become an educated professional who performs a task or business with expertise, and gives a double tithe to the church, but walks past the outcasts, the unfortunates, and the misled who do not fit our categories, walks past them with the grave, unbending profile of Flaxman's engraved hypocrites in Dante's *Inferno*. The temptation

Dordt has set you up for as an American college graduate come of age is whether to find and define your successful self now before you give yourself away, or to lose yourself unconditionally first of all in Christ's body so the Holy Spirit can do miracles through your gifts and then you yourself receive back a hundredfold in this life, perhaps with persecution (cf Luke 18:18-30).

You are not yet finished with Dordt, because your Dordt education will now be put to the

are formed, sometimes fearfully, sometimes gently, in the language, habits, and character of their parents. On a job, for example, in a bank or at a car service garage, a newcomer is trained in punching the computer or working the hydraulic lifts, and is molded by a look or the manager's comment to fit into the code of fashionable dress for bank tellers or the uniform of ESSO. In a given neighborhood one is soon educated into what is proper conduct on the streets of Sioux Center or in the subways of

HYPOCRITES



A SOLEMN TRAIN WITH WEARY STEP AND SLOW,
STILL SEEM'D TO WIND AROUND

test. The degree Dordt awards you today is your final exam. It will take five to ten or more years, into your thirties, around 2000 A.D., before anyone knows whether God rescued you from this educated temptation (cf II Peter 2:4-10) or you failed and became a baptized yuppy.

Education

This may all sound a bit sombre for a happy graduation, of which you may be justly glad, relieved, and thankful, but part of the good news I bring you today is a knowledge of the reality we are in. This is not a masquerade party. We are celebrating, in our robes, the very real, critical step in your life, moving from Dordt to education in the world at large.

Everybody is aware that education is not confined to the classroom. Children in a home

Toronto. That is, education lasts a lifetime and comes in countless varieties. One is constantly being educated, sometimes in the strangest circumstances. But the structure of education is always the same: a person is gradually shaped to act, to judge, imagine, speak, believe, see things in a certain perspective. When education takes place, one's consciousness becomes settled, set so that one's deeds, both private and public, develop definite contours. As woman or man you come to respond and to initiate things, be responsible, within an assumed, subliminal network of norms which carry a spirit of some sort. And when education really happens, it not only leads the horse to water but gets it drinking.

I don't know how many of you graduates are drinking the reforming Christian education Dordt offers. My wife and I have been glad and deeply thankful that the three of our family

could have the freedom to explore what gifts God may have given them here at Dordt. We know there is a dedicated attempt here, warts and all, not only in philosophy but in the arts—writing, theatre, and music—in the sciences, in communication, in theology, in engineering, and in all the other humanities, to make earnest with bringing the horses to water that will not leave them thirsty. The Bible's word for that kind of education is "a disciplining in doing what will stand God's test."

Scripturally-directed learning fashions people to come through with integrity in their field of study—whether it be foreign language or comic routines—to be upright, finding the Way to go that brings a touch of true, creaturely life and a rainbow of praise in a given area of human endeavour (II Timothy 3:16-17). When someone undergoes Christian education in the living Reformed tradition, he or she becomes busy, says the Bible, "in the ministry of reconciling creaturely activity back to God" (II Corinthians 5:17-19). So no wonder Dordt students practice in the New World theatre, at a New World symphony, and with New World philosophy, and New World agriculture as they raise hogs!

But I'm not out to eulogize Dordt education. Rather, the point is this: the education you graduates are about to undergo, as you leave Dordt College, is an educational order that is not marked by the ministry of reconciliation. That's not what is cooking in world society at large on the sidewalks of Main Street, U.S.A., or in the suburbs of Canadian cities. One can debate how mixed with blessing and curse North American society is, and I don't mean to imply that Dordt thinks it is without sin or corruption the way Mark Twain's Hadleyburg did. I don't imply that the victory of Jesus Christ's rule also over Reaganomics and foreclosed farms or Soviet terror or Darwinian competition is uncertain. But outside the protective environment of Dordt College—for which we may thank God—is an educational fabric that is bent, almost demonically, upon casting you (and us parents) into good old North American, upwardly mobile, secular boys and girls, rather than as a remnant of adopted sons and

daughters of the living God revealed in Jesus Christ.

On top of that, the education you graduates now face is first, no longer academic, unless you go on to school, and even if you do, second, is unprecedentedly on your own. (1) At college you can rewrite an essay or make-up a biology test you missed, but the way you raise your first-born child cannot be done over, as every parent knows. At college you may receive a flawless *A* in a theology class on Reformed Doctrine, but the dynamics of education are simply different when as a summer seminary stand-in you must hold your first funeral and provide comfort. At college when you try out for a dramatic part, you may end up doing scenery for your mark, and you normally solve one mathematical problem at a time, because it is an essential quality of academic education that you be able to re-do experiments and simplify reality for examination. But when you audition for a job in the theatre world of a city or have to set the price for a product in a business, the whole complicated universe of earning your keep, the nature of a just price, dealing with antagonistic faiths, as well as unknown people, crowds concretely into your education decision.

(2) And most of you will move on into affairs where we parents and your profs are simply no longer adequate as an example of how to cope with the strange opportunities you meet. In your twenties, before you are mature, you face, it seems, such pivotal matters as what to do with your life, with whom and how to spend this unrenowable resource of your lifetime in God's world. Because the educational process which will subtly envelop you graduates now with an increasingly hands-on effect is as powerful and wily, I believe, as the devil, the last point of my remarks is about Wisdom and the photographic portrait of the Near Eastern woman in your graduation program.

Wisdom

It's almost like a riddle in the Bible: you absolutely need it (Proverbs 3:13-18, 4:1-9); you can't go get it (Job 28); but it will be given to

you (Proverbs 2, Ecclesiastes 2:26)—wisdom. And the Scriptures say clearly that the only way for a person to walk through temptation, and to be unharmed and uncowed by the godless educational matrix of the secularized culture we historically inhabit and are compromised by again and again—the only way to be kept safe and to please God is to become a godly man or godly woman of wisdom (Romans 16:17-20). That means, as I understand God's Word, that anyone who professes to follow Jesus Christ is called to become more and more filled with the Holy Spirit (II Peter 3:11-18). That's not a polite request for dribbles of spirituality, or a hint to have regular, prayerful ecstasies. No, God calls us to be ordinary,

holy persons who know what God wants done and who thankfully do it (Romans 12:1-2, Ephesians 5:15-20). That's all (cf Micah 6:8).

The way to be given this pearl of wisdom which terminates selfish ambition and contentious jealousy, says the Bible (James 3:13-18), and leads you into all kinds of truth (cf John 14:26), is to ask God, who is generous, to give it to you (James 1:5). But again, that doesn't mean you ask God for wisdom the way you call up a Pizza Parlor and say, "Send over a Large with salami and mushrooms in 25 minutes." To ask to seek wisdom from the LORD, is to press for the crunch where your faith-rubber hits the road, because you are asking God to initiate you into the regiment of Jesus Christ's foot-



washing leadership (James 1:6-8, 19-27). A professing follower of Jesus Christ grows in wisdom by washing the feet of the lost, the lonely, the aimless, the inexperienced, the bored who do not smile, the many, many nameless ones who are unable to discern between good and evil (cf I Kings 3:6-9). God's children become wise when they take the lead in quietly exorcising the prejudices of mass culture's stereotypes, or begin to show others how to resist the devil of commercialism and pragmatism or defeatism with a humble yet lordly compassion and foresight for both victims and evil doers of such dead-end activities, even if it is to your own hurt (cf Matthew 10:16-23, 34-39).

Wisdom is what counts because wisdom is the way Christ's kingdom is coming on the face of the earth. Those praying to be wise, to be made an instrument of God's peace, must be down on their knees washing the feet of their neighbors with a redemptive, New-World smile. Inside the evangelism or cinema production, inside the selling of coffee, thinking through an analysis, sewing clothes, or making music and dance, they must be wise servants. Such holy spirited wisdom is what the LORD uses to have God's kingdom come, and such wisdom brings a bittersweet joy and grateful self-respect before God for the man or woman becoming wise in a way that surpasses and confounds any calculated, worldly success.

Since the Old Testament book of Proverbs portrays Wisdom as a woman (Proverbs 1:20-3, 8, 9:1-6) who has a commanding elegance and haunting beauty, this portrait by an unknown photographer in Egypt is meant as a keepsake for you graduates to remember Wisdom is your calling and promised blessing as a child of God. Wisdom is an attractive figure, composed and strong, eyes alert to sorrow; questioning lips full and rich and waiting; face, throat, and hands worn and lovely, sculpted by a reticent but steady, available love. This Wisdom is your biblical pin-up, courtesy of Dordt College, to take along to your secular dorm or office bulletin board, army barracks, or seminary—"Yes, my Christian college gave me this pin-up when I left; it's a

picture of Wisdom!" The Wisdom woman is the biblical thesis to which the Flaxman figures of pitiful, middle-aged yuppies going nowhere, as God sees them, is the antithesis.

So, graduates of Dordt College, on this day of temptation in 1985 A.D., as you face the prospects of a no-holds-barred education in the world at large, on this day of celebration, choose for Wisdom, and our LORD God of enduring peace shall surely attend you on your gladsome or troubled way.

Let me close with a brief prayer. If it would be genuine and meaningful for you as a graduate, parent, prof, or guest, to say an audible "Amen" to the prayer I make as a graduation day vow, to thank God for the gift of Wisdom which you want to claim for your own life or ask for in the life of someone graduating, please feel free to join me and repeat the "Amen."

LORD God,
in Jesus Christ be merciful to us as sinners of long standing. Also, please take our measurements today for the white robes the redeemed will wear someday soon. In the meantime, Lord, remember how fragile we are, and teach us by your Holy Spirit to become wise beyond our years so that the works of our hands and the love of our hearts may not cause You any shame, but endure past temptations to become genuine praise that will make You glad we have been called to be your children.

Hear us today in all our woebegone weakness, but also in Christ's redeeming strength, hear us as we make our vows and say, "Amen"!

SELECTED READING

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