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CONVOCATION ADDRESS

by B. J. Haan
President



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MEETING THE DEMANDS OF OUR HERITAGE

Dear Fellow Students:

This week marks the beginning of Dordt's twentieth year of operation. It is proper and, hopefully, profitable to engage in special recollection and reflection during this year in our history. Detailed plans for celebration have been carefully laid out. During the course of this academic year there will be ample opportunity for us as students and faculty to provide leadership in and draw inspiration from the discussions and events which transpire. Let us all pray and labor so that the activities of this anniversary year may make it an outstandingly significant one for

the advancement of Biblically-directed, God-centered, Reformed higher education.

Some of us vividly remember the opening of this institution. Dr. William Spoelhof, President of Calvin College, delivered the dedication, and initial convocation address before a large audience in the community auditorium. It was a grand event. Can you believe that we were delighted and grateful to the Lord for the five professors and thirty-five students present to begin our academic history? We were excited, indeed! There seemed to be something about the faith, the vision, the determination, and the spirit at that time which not only amazed us, but also

assured the blessing of the Lord. What characterized the mind and heart of God's people associated with the initiation of Dordt College has, thanks be to God, continued to this day. It is a quality of covenantal, communal, trustful living in the presence of the Lord and a basic commitment to the exaltation of His Son, Jesus Christ, which has kept us strong and has given us the will, the vigor, the light and the means to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. That ingredient of resilient, meaningful, deeply religious faith in God must always remain the badge which identifies our life and activity as a college community.

I am convinced that God's people throughout the land are keenly aware of Dordt's goals and aspirations. They see these reflected in our graduates, in the general life-style of our campus, in our academic endeavors, in the judicious actions and decisions of the governing boards, and in the continuing loyalty, love, and generous support of the constituency.

This is not to suggest that the road has always been smooth. Any institution which contends earnestly for the faith and whose constituents are vitally interested in the spiritual direction of their college can anticipate a few stormy seas. The very nature of a college community is one which, even in normal times, evokes reaction. For a college campus is mainly composed of young Christians struggling to find themselves within the kingdom life and its demands. The time spent at college is a period of trying, testing, and experimenting with ideas and styles of life. This creates tensions which call for a large measure of common sense. There must be room for a degree of flexibility and a good deal of understanding and patience. Let it not be forgotten either that an appreciable amount of sanctification goes on here at Dordt College. We see an ample exercise of the discipline of love. Those who set themselves outside of such discipline soon find that they can have no place here.

But we have not enjoyed normal days recently. The past few years have been trying ones for all ecclesiastical and educational institutions. We have experienced in our times

enormous social and religious upheavals. Nationally, we have witnessed a climate of uneasiness and frustration. Added to this is the fact that all around us there have been serious departures from the faith of our fathers and radical changes in life-styles. All of this was bound to affect life on our campus as well as others. Is it any wonder that many sincere, godly members of Christ's body have been on edge?

Nevertheless, in the face of these unusual circumstances, admitting that there may have been momentary lapses in good judgment and conduct, Dordt College has held firmly to its original purpose as a Christian Calvinistic institution of higher learning. As college President I wrote in the 1957 Voice the following:

We should make reference to the much neglected, if not forgotten, demands of our Calvinistic principles relating to education. Calvinists, acknowledging the true worth and dignity of the human mind and recognizing the pivotal importance of the mind in achieving the glory of God, let alone the clear demand of Scripture, 'bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ, 'have early blazed the trail for the best in education. Think of John Calvin. The time for the consideration of genuine Christian scholarship in our circles is here. God forbid that it ever become a secondary matter in Dordt College.

Again, from the Voice in 1959:

Dordt College arose not merely to provide teachers to keep one aspect of the kingdom machinery in operation. Dordt College came into being as an expression of the total development and activity of God's kingdom, for the purpose of answering to the total needs and responsibilities of that kingdom. Our college must be looked upon as a mighty kingdom force.

And from the Signet in 1961:

The life you have lived at Dordt College, academically, religiously, and socially was, we hope, Scripturally oriented. May the Lord prosper you in the glorious work entrusted to you

as citizens of His kingdom.

In this connection it is both comforting and encouraging to read what Dr. C. Van Til, a noted Reformed scholar, wrote recently concerning Dordt's 1968 statement of purpose, Scripturally Oriented Higher Education. Does Dr. C. Van Til think that the 1968 document is a departure from our traditional Reformed stance? Is it basically a different direction from what the college president took in 1959? I am selecting only a few brief statements from Dr. Van Til's letter, which contained several other encouraging comments. Listen to what Dr. Van Til has to say:

...I think you are using the traditional Reformed framework of thinking as your basic approach...As I read your document it is basically directed by this frame...Now this is, it seems to me the direction in which you are working. You want your students to obtain the biblical kingdom and/or covenant like that of Augustine, Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck, Schilder, de Graaf and K.G. Popma...I think you want to: (a) place Scripture where Calvin places it, as the sun-light of redemptive revelation without which no fact, pertaining to man, the world and God can be seen for what it is; (b) stress the fact that only the regenerate consciousness can see any fact pertaining to man, the world and God for what it is....

The assurance which Dr. Van Til's remarks convey underscores and gives greater validity to the continuing loyalty of our constituents. Our people generally and our academic community specifically have provided ample evidence of their belief and confidence that Dordt College is holding true to its calling, and that it will continue to expose and, if necessary, expel whatever is in serious disagreement with its goals and purposes.

This obviously means that we, as faculty and students, recognize and accept the high responsibility implied. We must struggle to attain a more thorough understanding of Dordt's basic principles. We must strive to articulate these principles more clearly and

to apply them with greater consistency and vigor to all areas of life and learning. This is not the time to engage in less communal discussion. Rather it is imperative that we engage more extensively and intensively in communal scholarship. Such discussion must take place in the framework of mutual respect, trust, and love. Remember, we need each other in this endeavor. Only by sharing each other's insights, only by a willingness to submit our thinking to the loving evaluation and criticism of our academic friends can the truth be served. In so doing let our chief objective be to bring greater honor to our Lord and to enhance the faith-life of the Christian community.

There are, of course, areas within our goals and purposes where differences of approach and emphasis should be permitted and are healthy. Then too there are certain aspects which require greater refinement and clarification. However, there are also very basic principles which must be honored and respected by all. For to teach or live contrary to these principles would be to cut at the very heart of our biblical, Reformed, world-and-life concept. This could only lead eventually to the death of that which is peculiarly, distinctively Dordt College. We would then no longer be a truly Calvinistic college. And that is precisely what our faithful, knowledgeable constituents are concerned about. That concern of the constituents we are obliged before God to respect. I realize that occasionally vociferous complaints are leveled at Dordt College by well-meaning members of the constituency who themselves evince departures from sound Reformed lines. This creates real problems for us, for it raises doubts concerning Dordt's integrity. To overcome this problem it is all the more imperative that we clearly spell out and sincerely reflect in our teaching and behavior those principles which are crucial in our faith commitment.

What are some of these basic principles?

Foremost among these principles is that concerning the high priority of the Holy Scriptures in all scholarship and activity. Dordt always has and always should recognize the Bible as the infallible key to all knowledge. It provides the directives for each science.

Although the Scriptures are not a textbook for the sciences, nothing may be taught which contradicts the Bible. Neither does Dordt accept any standard or philosophy outside of the Scriptures as equal in authority to the Scriptures by which standard(s) the Bible is to be interpreted. And when involved in a study of God's general revelation, which is, after all, the task of Christian education, we look upon the Scriptures as having sole priority, as that light in which we see God's light in creation.

A second very important principle is this: that nothing be taught which is in disagreement with our Reformed ecclesiastical creeds or confessions. If it is true that the ecclesiastical creeds are not sufficient for our educational institution--a position which many Reformed scholars hold--it is also to be observed that an educational "creed" may in no sense contradict our Reformed church creeds. Rather, educational "creeds" should enhance and reflect our ecclesiastical creeds. The two are to be alike in their basic roots, yet serving different purposes. For that reason all teachers at Dordt College are required to honor and to teach in agreement with the ecclesiastical confessions, the Formulae of Unity.

Implied in our respect for the ecclesiastical creeds is that we accept the Ten Commandments, so beautifully expounded in the Heidelberg Catechism, as the law of God for our entire life. This, of course, indicates Dordt's position relative to Christian liberty and situational ethics. By a faithful adherence to the moral law of God we will promote a life-style which is conducive to the fulfillment of our task as citizens of Christ's kingdom. This is of vital significance. Dordt has gained a fine reputation for its wholesome Christian atmosphere and life. Students are attracted to Dordt because of it. Let us make certain that it is never lost.

Time does not permit me to elaborate at length on some of the other principles which are crucial in our commitment. I can only make mention of them. Dordt regards the instituted church as central and indispensable within the kingdom. It is, indeed, one organization alongside of others within the kingdom. However, it has the highest priority. For it is the only divinely instituted organi-

zation for the promotion of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. We hold, furthermore, to the biblical teaching that Christ's redemptive work has cosmic significance. Christ has redeemed not only a new humanity through the regenerating power of the Spirit, but also and consequently the entire universe. That universe is now under His reign and dominion as the God-man-mediator. Dordt must see its central task as an educational institution to be that of walking in covenantal fellowship with Christ in every domain of the cosmos, searching out all that He has revealed. And it is our task to promote the glory of Christ by calling men everywhere to acknowledge His kingship and to be obedient to His will in every area of life. We must reclaim all of life for Christ's service. Finally, we proclaim that, although this is our calling in the world, only by the cataclysmic return of Jesus Christ will His Kingdom fully come.

This past Monday we began the celebration of our twentieth anniversary by calling our constituents together on the Dordt campus. That is the way it should begin, for the people of God in this area gave rise to Dordt College and have faithfully stood by it. It remains for us here to honor these hopes, visions and dreams by our continued commitment to the best in the Reformed tradition. We know from experience that resolute dedication to that tradition may well meet with stubborn resistance and stiff opposition from various directions and various individuals and groups of individuals. But this must not deter us.

I am reminded, in this connection, of two well known hymns:

Dare to be a Daniel
Dare to stand alone
Dare to have a purpose firm
Dare to make it known.

and:

Since I must fight if I would reign
Increase my courage, Lord
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain
Supported by Thy Word.

Therefore, "...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so early beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith...." Hebrews 12:1,2