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Literature and the Reformed Community

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Incidentally

by Lillian V. Grissen

Literature and the Reformed Community

Responsibility for the arts at Dordt College should be placed within the proper academic departments. Dordt College should appoint a council to advise the president on all art: painted, displayed, written, or performed by Dordt professors or students. If or when a question arises or controversy erupts, the president can and should stand with and support that Christian art and its artist. These would be substantial steps toward narrowing the gap between audiences and Christian artists and their art and encouraging a needed sense of responsibility towards one another as members of the body of Christ.

These recommendations concluded the three-lecture series on "Literature and the Reformed Community," given in September by Hugh Cook and James Vanden Bosch, professors of English at Dordt College.

Vanden Bosch introduced the series with a review of H. Richard Niebuhr's (*Christ and Culture*) five theories on interpreting art. These theories spoke of Christ against, Christ of, and Christ above culture, Christ in paradox, and Christ as transformer of culture. The latter position is the one with which reformed Christians are familiar, said Vanden Bosch, but Christians need to understand its meaning more fully. He also briefly explained the mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective theories of art as expressed by M. H. Abrams (*The Mirror and the Lamp*). Vanden Bosch concluded his lecture with an historical overview and explained both use and abuse of art.

In pleading for a richer understanding of and deeper appreciation for art, Vanden Bosch quoted a staunch defender of Christian arts, the late Henry Zylstra, as

saying that the more knowledge and appreciation of literature Christians have, the more they have to be Christian with.

Cook concentrated on practical matters, citing the need for Christian support and appreciation of art. Discussing the controversial subject of censorship, he emphasized the need of the audience to identify and interpret the author's tone. Characters, Cook pointed out, must be genuine, three-dimensional, and believable; the sins of speech or action spoken or done by the characters should not be attributed to the writer, as is so often done. Sin depicted to show its destructiveness in society, he said, should not be confused with explicit sin included for its own sake.

Cook listed many reasons for the misunderstanding and lack of understanding between artist, specifically authors, and audience. The artist himself too often contributes to the gap, he said. Moral vacuity, an elitist attitude, the concept of artist as visionary prophet, scientism, television, and advertising have often prevented audiences from closing that gap. Secularization is the heart of the problem of gap between artist and audience, said Cook.

Any effort to reduce and close the gap must begin with an awareness of responsibility of artist and audience to each other. The community of believers should develop an *office*, a *calling*, of art critic, one who would serve as an instructor-evaluator for the Christian community. Required is an active role by educators to develop appreciation of the arts by students in Christian schools. Cook suggested this can begin with Dordt College taking the initiative at the college level.