
Pro Rege

Volume 50 | Number 3

Article 2

March 2022

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Recommended Citation

Mulder, David J. (2022) "We GET to Do This! Formed with Purpose: Dordt University Commencement - May 7, 2021," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 50: No. 3, 9 - 13. Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol50/iss3/2

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We GET to Do This! Formed with Purpose: Dordt University Commencement – May 7, 2021



by David Mulder

Graduates, family and friends, my colleagues of the faculty, staff, administration at Dordt University, and Defender Nation, it is SO good to be with you! It is a real honor and privilege for me to address you today. And after a year of far too many Zoom meetings, I am grateful that we can meet in person today. I think it's safe to say that I will never take the opportunity to meet together, like this, for granted again.

I LOVE graduation ceremonies. These are milestone-marker events; a time to pause and reflect on where we have been and where we hope to go in the future. I love the rituals we incorporate into these kinds of celebrations too—even the caps

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and gowns, which I know some people think are silly. The truth is, I get a little excited every time I haul out my robe and hood and funny hat. I know that some of my colleagues roll their eyes at me a little when we're dressing up, because I always say something like, "You guys, we GET to do this!"

My colleagues in the Education Department hear me say that more often, actually. I love pretty much every part of the work I'm called to as a professor, and that phrase, "We GET to do this!," is my way of expressing my joy for all the things I get to do in my professional work. It's a phrase that has become a natural part of my vocabulary, something that I readily "profess."

And so, on this auspicious occasion, it's in a "We GET to do this" sort of way that I would like to reflect with you today on Philippians 1:3-6. I am confident that many of you have heard this passage before, and I think it is a sort of "classic" passage of Scripture for graduation ceremonies. But I believe there is a good reason this passage is used so often in these occasions of marking milestones: this is an important reminder for us of who we are, and who God is, and what He calls us to. Paul begins his letter to the Philippian Christians with these words:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.¹

I want you to think particularly about what this passage has to say about how God is forming you—that it is God who began a good work in you, and it is God who will carry it on to completion in you. I believe that this sort of formation is purposeful, and it’s my deep hope that being part of the community here at Dordt has been a key part in this formational work that God has been doing in each of your lives.

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about education as formation. Several years ago, I read the book *Desiring the Kingdom*, by Jamie Smith.² In this book, Smith suggests that people often view education as gaining *information*, but a more nuanced view of education is that it is actually a sort of *formation*.³ In other words, becoming “educated” is much more than just the facts, more than just what we know, more than just what we think. A real education, instead, shapes *who we are* and *how we act* as we live our lives.⁴ And fundamentally, this is why I’m so grateful for the role this institution has played in my life. While I am here today as a member of the faculty, I’m also a Dordt alumnus. My experiences as a student at Dordt profoundly shaped who I am and how I act as I live my life.

I came to this campus as a wide-eyed freshman in the fall of 1994 and moved into North Hall. Having grown up in southern California, I was ill-equipped for changing seasons and icy sidewalks and—at that time, anyway—the fact that I had to drive an hour to get to a movie theater. But I very quickly found a group of friends from across North America, many of whom I keep in touch with to this day. We jumped in to our first semester of courses, and praise and worship, and Pizza Ranch buffet, and watching hockey games, and singing in chorale, and those midnight donut runs. I was an elementary-education major, and I thoroughly enjoyed learning to teach—including the projects like making sock puppets to present a lesson in class, which my roommate, majoring in philosophy, found incredibly frustrating when he was plowing through his massive textbook on ancient and medieval philosophers. Different strokes for different folks, I guess.

What I’m trying to say is that I LOVED taking courses in my major, and I suspect you have enjoyed studying your major as well. Even then, I

felt a sense of, “You guys, we GET to do this!”—we get to study topics and concepts that stir our excitement and make our eyes light up. As you’ve gone deeper into the content within your major, you’ve explored English, or chemistry, or music, or engineering, or history, or social work...and, in the process of exploring your discipline, you’ve also built relationships with your professors and classmates, and you’ve participated in developing a learning community around a shared love of a subject. This is education as formation, and I hope you have felt a sense of “We GET to do this” throughout your studies.

But as I further reflect on my student experience, I know there were also courses I didn’t always look forward to with quite as much enthusiasm. Maybe this was true for you, at least at some points. For me, in particular, I often felt that I “had to” take CORE courses—it wasn’t quite the same “get to” that I felt with courses in my major.

Taking Biblical Foundations, I felt like, “I’ve been reading the Bible for years! Do I really need to take this course?” Taking Introduction to the Arts, I felt like, “I am never going to be an art teacher, or a music teacher, or a theater teacher, so why should I care about this at all?” Taking Introduction to Christian Philosophy, I felt like, “What does philosophy actually have to do with any part of real life???” Taking Communication Foundations, I felt like, “When am I ever going to make speeches? This is ridiculous!” (Ah, and here I am, of course.) And then there was GEN 300—that’s what our capstone course in the CORE program was called back in the 1990s—honestly, I did not appreciate the opportunity to take GEN 300 when I enrolled in the course in the fall of 1997.

But here’s the thing: looking back from my current vantage point, I can say, with certainty, that these courses were among the most important I took while I was a student at Dordt. The courses I took in the CORE program—even the ones I didn’t appreciate in the moment when I was taking them—were incredibly formative in not just how I think, but how I actually *live my life* today. In fact, if I had to choose one course that made the most difference in how I live out my faith on a day-to-day basis today, it wasn’t any course in the Education program. It was that CORE capstone! I

take my faith more seriously, and I am more aware of the counter-cultural nature of the Gospel in our society today, as a result of taking that course. It impacted the way I am as a husband and father, the way I engage in politics, the way I spend my time, the way I use money—almost every important part of my contemporary life has had some impact because of that course. Twenty-two-year-old me would not have believed that, but the things I learned in GEN 300 definitely became part of me. I was formed by what I learned, not just in a “here’s

it on to completion. I hope that you can see things that have happened throughout your experience at Dordt as these kinds of formative opportunities that have shaped not just how you think, but how you will *be* in this world.

Your time as a part of the community at Dordt has been an opportunity to develop a Christian imagination—what is Jesus really calling us to do? How is He really calling us to *be*? What if we took Him seriously and joyfully keep on learning to live out our faith? Maybe this is what Paul is getting at

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what I should think about these topics” kind of way, but in a “God began a good work in me and is faithful to carry it on to completion” kind of way.

Being part of the community here at Dordt has impacted you in ways that you may not yet be able to perceive. And while your coursework was—I hope—formative, all of the other things you’ve had opportunities to do have also shaped you. Playing on a team, singing in a choir, playing in an ensemble, being part of student government, being active in a club: all of these are formative activities that have shaped you in particular ways. Participating in worship opportunities with this community has shaped you in particular ways. Work-study jobs, and conversations with members of staff and faculty, are formative experiences that have shaped you in particular ways. The friendships you’ve made in the dorms and the dining hall, and grabbing a cup of coffee and a cinnamon roll from the campus coffee shop—all of these have been formative experiences that have shaped you in particular ways. And my hope is, as you’ve been part of this institution that is collectively striving to be Christ-centered in every area, that these formative experiences have been shaping you to become more and more Christ-like in your thinking, in your behavior, and in your actions. This is formation with purpose: you have been shaped for service in the kingdom! God began a good work in you, and He will be faithful to carry

when he talks about God carrying on to completion the good work he started “until the day of Christ Jesus.” We are being invited into something so much bigger than anything we might have chosen for ourselves, and perhaps we can’t even picture it just yet! Friends, we GET to do this! Our primary calling is to *faithfully follow Jesus*. And within that calling, God *invites* us to participate in the restoration of all things—AS IF He needs us to do that! I mean, He is the omnipotent King of Creation; He certainly does not *need* us. But here we are, as God’s people in the world, called to follow and invited to participate. This is not easy work; this is not tidy work. Sometimes it will be painful. Sometimes it will be heartbreaking. But it is always good work. It is always *joyful* work. And God welcomes us to participate in the unfolding of his kingdom.

This *participation* is what I mean when I say, “We GET to do this!” By now, I am certain you’ve heard Dordt’s mission statement multiple times, but I want to share it with you one more time:

“As an institution of higher education committed to the Reformed Christian perspective, Dordt equips students, alumni, and the broader community to work effectively toward Christ-centered renewal in all aspects of contemporary life.”⁵

Notice the word “equip” in this mission.

Perhaps you think of this equipping, first of all, as the knowledge and skills you'll need to succeed in the world of work? It certainly is that. But what if it's *more* than just knowing what you need to know to get a job? Because notice again how this mission wraps up—what are we aiming towards? Equipping for “working effectively towards Christ-centered renewal in *all aspects of contemporary life*.” That is what I think a Dordt education is really all about: you have been shaped through many formational experiences to work towards the breaking-in of Christ's kingdom in *all* aspects of your life! In your work, yes, but also in your relationships, your community, your political engagement, your church life, your hobbies, the places you will volunteer and serve, people you will mentor, the way you invest your time and money. Christ's kingdom is coming in all these places, and you've been equipped for working as kingdom builders.

So, look for where God is at work—and do that! Get busy being about the coming of Christ's kingdom. God began this good work in you, and He will be faithful to carry it on to completion. Through your education at Dordt, you have had the opportunity to grow in understanding Creation and your place in it. You have learned to discern the broken places where sin has twisted and tarnished the goodness of Creation. You have been shown Jesus and the cosmic scope of His redeeming work, thanks be to God! And you have been encouraged to imagine ways that Christ invites us into working towards the restoration of all things! This is our calling—our broadest calling—as Christ-followers: we GET to do this! YOU get to do this! You've been formed with purpose, and you're ready for it—so go get busy in the work of Christ's coming-and-already-here kingdom!

Serving and building Christ's kingdom will continue to stretch you. You need to keep learning, keep growing in your faith life. This will sometimes be uncomfortable, but you've been shaped for this as well. In this light, I want to close with a challenging blessing. Some of you have heard this from me before, as I have used it as part of my closing lesson in the geography course I teach in the CORE program. It is a Benedictine blessing, and while I am not Roman Catholic, I think that the beautiful, thought-provoking message here resonates to all

people who take seriously the call to follow Jesus. This is my deep hope for us all as we reflect on how we have been formed, and to what end:

May God bless you with a restless DISCOMFORT about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships

so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy ANGER at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people

so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of TEARS to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish

so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform that pain to joy.

May God bless you with enough FOOLISHNESS to believe that you really can make a difference in this world

so that you are able, with God's grace to do what others claim cannot be done.

And may the blessing of God be with you and remain with you, this day and forevermore.

Amen.⁶

Walking the way of Jesus and working for the coming of his kingdom is not easy work, clearly. I sincerely hope that you'll continue to grapple with the message of the Gospel, and what it means to faithfully follow Jesus. *Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly. Love the Lord with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.* Keep praying, “your kingdom come, your will be done”—and work towards this reality. We GET to do this, friends—it's what you've been prepared to do! Grace and peace to you all as you head out from this place, knowing that God goes with you, and that he will continue the good work He began in you until the day of Christ Jesus.

Endnotes

1. Philippians 1:3-6, *New International Version*.
2. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the kingdom (cultural liturgies): Worship, worldview, and cultural formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

3. See pp. 17-18, which includes this gem: “What if education, including higher education, is not primarily about the absorption of ideas and information, but about the *formation* of hearts and desires? What if we began by appreciating how education not only gets into our head but also (and fundamentally) grabs us by the gut—what the New Testament refers to as *kardia*, ‘the heart’? What if education was primarily concerned with shaping our hopes and passions—our visions of ‘the good life’—and not merely about the dissemination of data and information as inputs to our thinking? What if the primary work of education was the transforming of our imagination rather than the saturation of our intellect? And what if this had as much to do with our bodies as with our minds?” (Emphasis in the original.)
4. This is the key question Smith raises in *Desiring the Kingdom*: “What if education wasn’t first and foremost about what we know but about what we love?” (p. 18).
5. Dordt University. “Our Mission and Vision.” <https://www.dordt.edu/about-dordt/our-mission-vision>.
6. Ruth Marlene Fox, “A Four-Fold Benedictine Blessing.” *World Prayers*, https://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/invocations/may_god_bless_you_with_a_restless.html.