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Editor's Note: This article is based on the text of President Zylstra's 1996 Convocation address.

One Last Chance to Tell the Truth: Possibilities and Perils in a Postmodern Age



by Carl E. Zylstra

Though I myself have been part of this college community for less than two months, I do have the honor this morning of welcoming the six new faculty members, other new employees, returning faculty and staff, members of the board of trustees, friends, and—most of all—the students who have come as part of this year's record-breaking enrollment. Welcome to the 42nd academic year at Dordt College.

Dr. Zylstra is the third President of Dordt College. He is a graduate of Calvin College and Seminary and was ordained in the Christian Reformed Church in 1973. In 1983 he received the Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary.

I surely hope that you enjoy the expanded and refreshed campus atmosphere. Thanks to Dr. Hulst's foresight and leadership, many of the faculty have moved into a new and spacious office building, the maintenance department has a first class home of their own and the superstructure for the new recreation center has been erected and enclosed. This auditorium has been refurbished, the academic skills center and additional computer lab on the lower level of the library is now open, additional fiber optic connections have been completed, and a new telecommunications system has been purchased and is being brought on line this week.

So there's a great infrastructure in place, there are quality instructors and a terrific support staff ready to go—and we have more students than ever before. The only real question mark over this academic year is, "Why?" Why do we do all this? What is our identity and what is the purpose of all that we are going to do. Just who are we and why are we here?

That really is what a convocation exercise is all about. This isn't an opening chapel service as would be commonly understood. Rather this is an academic gathering. The faculty are all decked out in their robes and hoods and the vice president for academic affairs presides. We are here this morning to begin this year by asking once again, who are we as a college and why are we here?

For more than 40 years Dordt College has tried to answer that question by declaring that this college provides a reformational education. And it may be that the word "reformational" was not

always the best one to use. Sometimes it sounded like jargon; sometimes it sounded like a code word for the educational pretensions of a narrowly defined subculture. Nevertheless, it was a good word and meant something like this: We believe that effective education must be formed by the belief that the way to truth comes not first of all through the power of human reason but instead arises out of the insight provided by the revealed Word of God.

Moreover, there were sound historical reasons for using the term “reformational” to identify that difference between what we try to accomplish in this college and what the general trend of education in Western culture is attempting to do. For as the recovery of Scripture-governed living promulgated by the Reformers spread across Europe and beyond, a parallel spirit also arose that declared human independence from all divine control over thought and life. The spirit that believed that human reason could be unleashed to conquer all problems and create all good came at last to be known as the Enlightenment and became the foundation of the modern era.

And so the battle was joined. Which would prevail, Reformation or Enlightenment? It wasn’t that reformational thought denigrated reason. Rather, it simply insisted that all true enlightenment had to arise out of the illumination of God’s Word revealed in the sacred scriptures and pointing us to Jesus Christ, without whom nothing in this universe has been created (John 1:3) and in whom all things finally hold together (Colossians 1:17). As my former teacher, philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, has put it aptly, only within those bounds of religion can reason flourish and achieve its true goal.¹ Reason can never enlighten on its own.

I know that I’m oversimplifying this brief history of Western thought, yet essentially these battle lines continued to hold throughout the centuries since. Often colleges would be established on the Reformation side of the battle and eventually fall to the Enlightenment side. As George Marsden, writing about Protestant institutions² and Tom Burtchaell, observing Roman Catholic education³ have concluded, schools generally switched sides primarily in order to share in the prestige that the modern era had bestowed on the age of reason.

Still, although we may have done so imperfectly and sometimes with a touch of arrogant triumphalism, Dordt College, along with other like-minded schools, has refused to give in. We have insisted that we would not trade the inheritance of the Reformation for the thin gruel of the more popularly accepted rationalist thought of the modern era. We do believe that God’s Word alone gives light. That others may refuse to walk in that light will not dissuade us, even if it includes most of the academic institutions and scholars around us. At Dordt College, God’s Word will be the light upon our path, not just for our values and relationships, but for our scholarship and service as well.

But now somebody suddenly has switched the rules of the game. We did okay while fighting the modern age of enlightenment. We pretty clearly understood those rules of engagement that had been hammered out in the halls of academe over the past few centuries. Yet suddenly everything has changed. Now we are told that modernism is dead and that we have entered a “postmodern” world. After fighting the triumphalistic claims of autonomous human reason for a few hundred years, suddenly we discover that the other side has conceded our point, saying, in effect, “You’re absolutely right. Reason is a false god and an empty hope. We don’t trust in reason any longer either.”

So now what do we do?

In his *Primer on Postmodernism*, Professor Stanley Grenz from Regent College points out the massive shifts in thought between the plan and plot of the television program, *Star Trek: the Next Generation* and its original predecessor.⁴ His point is that the original *Star Trek* series represented the epitome of modernism but with *The Next Generation* series, postmodernism has triumphed.

To extend Grenz’s illustration, we at Dordt College knew pretty well how to battle the Captain Kirks and Mr. Spocks of this world. They represented the brash swashbuckling arrogance of the thoroughly modern word that could combine the absolute reasonableness of Mr. Spock with the single-minded assertiveness of Captain Kirk to conquer any challenge and any world that might be discovered as the human race journeys forward into the deepest recesses of the universe. Against such unbridled confidence in perfect reason we

could “just say no” and call our world back to the purpose and value of faith in the Lord who created and rules, and to discovery of the laws of the Savior who redeems even the most remote corner of his universe.

But how are we ever to handle Jean-Luc Picard, Data, and Counselor Troi? They embody the ideals of the postmodern world where reason can be relegated to android machines like Data while what really counts are the emotive dimensions uncovered by Counselor Troi and the direction given by a modest caring leader like Captain Picard. We can continue to rail against the power of reason as extolled for the past centuries by our modern world. However, today the postmodern world simply concurs, declaring, we agree. All the reason we need can be found on a Pentium processor. What we concentrate on is feeling and relating, for that alone makes our postmodern world worth our living in it.

What then is a reformational college to do? Now that our ancient foe of modernism and enlightenment thought seems to be falling like the Berlin wall, how do we handle the brave new world in which we find ourselves? Do we simply declare victory and walk away, joyfully joining the celebration as icons of reason are toppled from their pedestals the way jubilant students demolished the statues of Stalin and his fellow travelers as the Cold War ended?

In the June 1966 edition of *Christian Scholar's Review*, Dale Soden and Kathleen Storm indicate that, indeed, there is much to celebrate in the fall of modernism.⁵ After all, they point out, religious communities are increasingly recognized as being on a common par with other ways of thinking and believing. As the secular academy increasingly finds itself limited to claims that “This is the way we see it,” presumably the door is opened for Christian scholars to respond, “But this is the way we would perceive it.”

Especially for institutions such as Dordt College, there seems to be a new opening to say boldly in center court what once we could only hint at quietly from the sidelines. With the hegemony of the Enlightenment arrogance of reason finally broken, the way now should be open for our voice to be heard clearly at last.

Grenz comments on four aspects of postmodernism which, in fact, should give some heart to

those who have toiled in the wilderness of reformational scholarship for so long.⁶

First, professor Grenz observes, postmodernism is post individualism—very good news for this campus which has insisted all along that such ought to be the case. For forty years we have insisted that true scholarship must be done in community. The individualism of Western society may make for good political rhetoric, but it doesn't come from the Scripture which tells us that right from the start God created the human race in community as male and female (Genesis 1:26-27) and that all his dealings with the race ever since have continued to be dealings with community.

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any longer either?*

Second, postmodernism is post rationalism—something which, again, has been taught on this campus for almost half a century. No matter how boldly it may have been extolled, rationalism remains a dead end for the human race because we never can rise above ourselves. New understandings of the sociology of knowledge (the recognition that words make sense only as used in community context) ought to open up new possibilities for our witness from colleges such as this one which always have insisted that we must learn together because only together can we uncover the word of truth which comes to us as a community and which leads us to respond as a community.

Third, postmodernism is post dualism—something anyone who has been on this campus any length of time ought to cheer. This college never has had the slightest intention of being dualistic in any sense whatsoever. We do not want to separate residence life from academic life—we learn as a residential community. We do not want to separate head knowledge from heart knowledge—it is from a heart of obedience that we offer our minds to be renewed. We do not want to separate faith from knowledge—it is only out of faith that we gain knowledge of the truth which flows from the One whom we know in faith. In this respect, once again, the postmodern era seems ready-made for what this college attempts to accomplish.

Grenz's final point is that postmodernism is post

noeticentrism. Or, as we might more likely say, post intellectualism. From day one Dordt College has resisted the temptation of trying to become an elitist center of intellectual prowess. For intellectual gifts are only part of the whole process by which we become the new people Christ died and rose for us to be. What we're after is wisdom which is granted by the Spirit of God. You can get information any place on the Internet. You can exercise your intellect with a good book. We need to keep our eye on the ball of wisdom—and, in that respect, the postmodern age appears ready to give us a new hearing.

If Grenz is correct that the postmodern era is post individual, post rationalistic, post dualistic, and post intellectualistic, then Dordt College today faces some of the greatest possibilities ever to let its voice be heard to allow the light of God's Word to shine. Indeed, if Grenz's observations are accurate, then there probably has never been a more opportune time since the rise of the Enlightenment for truly reformational thought to come into its own.

Yet we have to ask again, what do we do now? Do we simply declare victory and walk away? According to David Wells from Gordon Conwell Seminary, apparently joining in the victory celebration is exactly what a good deal of American evangelicalism has decided to do. I won't repeat here what *Time* magazine called his "stinging indictment of evangelicalism's theological corruption," except to summarize Well's argument by recalling the title of the book, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*

To a great degree, Wells surely is correct in describing much contemporary North American religion. It seems that many of us have discovered an almost giddy happiness over the realization that religion once again is "in." Books on angels sell like latte' at the Barnes and Noble, and it doesn't seem to bother much of anyone that the angels about which most people talk are virtually indistinguishable from the forest sprites that my pagan ancestors worshiped in the forests of Northern Europe. As Charles Colson scored American Protestants in his book on *The Body*,⁸ any attempt today to point out religious differences becomes tagged as divisive arrogance. For in the truly postmodern world, who's to say who's right and who's

wrong. What counts is how you feel about it and what you do with it. In the postmodern world, religion is in, but truth is out.

As a slowly growing chorus of voices attempts to warn us, any church or religion that tries to sell itself as a full partner in the postmodern world may well find itself reduced to just another custom and superstition in the pantheon of the new paganism that is sweeping across what Wells, in the title of his second book, calls the "Postmodern Wasteland of Western Civilization."⁹ In fact, precisely there lies the peril of postmodernism for the educational task of Dordt College. Any Christian educational institution that joins the postmodern party of dancing on the ruins of modernism's shrine to reason will soon find itself in the circle dance of death which concludes, "Ashes, ashes, we *all* fall down."

When he reviewed George Marsden's book on secularism in the academy, John Q. Wilson from Princeton quizzically wondered why Marsden seemed so worried about secularism when, in his experience, there now was more interest in religion than ever before in higher education.¹⁰ And Wilson makes a good point. If having religion become evident in the academy were the objective, then perhaps we should simply declare victory and shut our doors.

However, Dordt College always has argued that all education intrinsically will be religiously motivated at any time and in any era, even if that religion is secularism or modernism. Dordt College does not exist to advocate religion. We exist to speak for the truth, to seek the truth, and to train others to pursue the truth in their studies now and throughout their lives. And it is for the sake of the One who said that he himself is the truth that all we do is motivated by, illumined by, and formed by the truth revealed in his written word so that we can discern the truth of his word by which he holds and unfolds all that he has made.

Only at its own peril, then, will any college with a truly reformational heritage take comfort from postmodernism's dethronement of reason in favor of the standards of what works for you and what feels right in your heart. When philosophers such as Richard Rorty¹¹ began to measure scholarship by the standard of linguistic utility for a given community, some Christian scholars took heart

that cracks were opening in the monolithic monopoly of positivist reason that had marginalized so many of us for so long. Yet if the price of acceptance into the intellectual public square includes conceding that all our language is only self-referential, working only for those of us in the sheltered communities of religio-ethnic subcultures, then that is a price which, in effect, demands that we sell out the soul of our academy—and that is a price we cannot pay.

It was the sociologist Peter Berger who pointed out some time ago that we are moving to a world of what he called *The Heretical Imperative*.¹² Berger argued that in the past what was true or untrue had been defined by communities but in the future those issues would be defined by each of us as individuals. And so no longer do people say, “My church, my government, my nation, my community believes this or that.” We have come to a day when people now decide such things on their own. The old question, “What do we believe about that?” has been replaced with the personal sentiment, “How do I feel about that?”

Such a shift brings special peril for institutions such as this college that want to insist that there are things that everyone who honors the truth ought to accept and affirm whether we feel good about it or not. And that brings particular peril in the postmodern age where the tyranny of autonomous reason has been overthrown, only to be replaced by the tyranny of individual preference. Indeed, apparently the only folks considered heretics in our postmodern age are those who insist that there is a truth of God’s law which underlies all of creation and that our duty as creatures of our God and servants of our Savior is to discern that truth and then, in the light of that truth, to reform not only our own personal lives, but also the very structure of the world of human knowledge and experience.

Personally, I’m not quite certain which peril looms larger before a Christian college today—the peril that we abandon our pursuit of truth in order to find acceptance at the table of personal relativism or the peril that we continue our pursuit of truth and find ourselves suffering the fate of ostracism and worse which generally befalls those who dare to defy the governing intellectual fashion of their day.

In some respects, I feel as if I’m back in elementary school. Back when I was in 6th grade or so at Baxter Street Christian School in Grand Rapids, Michigan, we had a principal named Mr. Elve who was pretty good at finding out the truth from those of us who might get in trouble. One of his favorite techniques involved isolating some of us whom he suspected of being involved in some incident, probe us with questions, gather what information he could and then announce, “Okay, now I’m going to give you one last chance to tell the truth. If you tell the truth now, I’ll go easy on you. If you don’t, then you’ll be in real trouble.”

Perhaps that’s exactly where Western civiliza-

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tion finds itself today as societies rapidly abandon the foundations on which they were built, often descending into violence, collapse of social order, and even outright civil war. Perhaps this is the time when God is saying to us, “Okay, I’m giving you one last chance to tell the truth. For if you don’t your world truly will then be in dreadful trouble.”

It was about a thousand years ago or so that my own Frisian ancestors emerged from the forests of Northern Europe, stopped painting themselves blue, and abandoned their use of sacred trees and forest sprites as tools for their worship of Woden. They didn’t forsake those forest haunts in order somehow to become more “spiritual.” Surely, there was no place more filled with spirits than the woods through which they had roamed. Rather, they emerged from the forest because they had been set free from the haunt of the forest by the Word of God’s truth and the Word become flesh who gave them life over which no woodland spirit could hold sway any longer.

On the other side of my family, it was only a couple of hundred years ago that my Huguenot ancestors fled their peasant homes in France because those who held the reins of religious and political power insisted that they no longer speak the truth of God's word: they would be silent, or they would die.

Today as our postmodern world once again seeks refuge in resacralized nature, festoons its clothes and notebooks with spirit sprites (whether called "angels" really doesn't matter), this is not the time for the intellectual descendants of those who once renounced those ways of darkness to turn back into darkness once again. Indeed, as we come to the verge of the new millennium, this is no time for those who follow in the footsteps of those who abandoned home and fortune in obedience to the truth, now to decide that in the end, truth really doesn't matter after all, if, in fact, it even exists.

Even at the peril of being cut out of popular fashion and intellectual responsibility, it is clear which road we must follow and which peril we must brave if Dordt College is to continue faithfully following the One who not only shows us the way, but actually is Himself the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14.6).

For if we do not do so, who will? If we don't tell the truth, who shall? In a world that increasingly dismisses even the possibility of truth, in a world where even scholars increasingly place the world "truth" in quotation marks as if to question even the validity of using such a category, in a world where feeling and personal choice reign supreme over God's word of creation and revelation, this may be one of our last chances to tell the truth.

Whether Dordt College and those who share this mission with us have only one last chance at telling the truth, no one really can presume to say. Only God knows the future. But what we do know is that, by his grace, this year again we do have one *more* chance to tell the truth. And so today we begin another academic season as a college which for 41 years has been dedicated to the glory of the Lord who claims each one of us and every part of our work and world as his own and which for 41 years has been committed to telling the wonders of His truth.

The postmodern age in which we now live has

brought us new opportunities, ones we have never had before. But it also brings new dangers. So in the end, perhaps, we begin this year exactly where we always have begun. Possibilities? Indeed. Perils? Certainly. Reformational? Always. Because a firm belief that the foundation of God's Word is the source of all true faith and understanding remains the only way to honor the God who alone is the source of all that really is the truth.

Students, faculty, staff, supporters, and friends, it's time to get back to work, not for our sake but for Christ's sake and for the sake of the world he came to redeem. For the welfare of a world running back into the darkness and for the benefit of a collapsing civilization left in its wake, let us meet the possibilities of this year and boldly brave its perils. It is the providence of our God that has brought us together in this place and it is he who has given us one more chance this year to tell the truth.

So let us now begin and let us together seek and serve the truth. And may all praise be to God alone. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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