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A Place For Dordt College? (Inaugural Address)

John B. Hulst
President of Dordt College



Setting the tone for his new position, John B. Hulst presents the address he delivered on the occasion of being inaugurated as the second president of Dordt College. "A Place for Dordt College?" was originally delivered on October 23, 1982.

Dr. Boeve and others of you who share this platform with me;
Representatives of colleges, universities, learned societies, and educational associations;
Representatives of government;
Representatives of the church and church organizations;
Members of the Board of Trustees and the Voting Members Board;
Members of the administration, faculty, and student body;
President Emeritus, Rev. Haan;
Friends of Dordt College:

On March 18 of this year I informed the Board of Trustees that I had accepted the appointment as the president of Dordt College. I did so *gratefully*, realizing the honor involved; *hesitatingly*, aware of the demands of the position; *humbly*, conscious

of personal limitations; and *confidently*, trusting in God's blessings. I did so also assuming that I would receive the support of the entire Dordt College community, not first of all for my sake but for the sake of the college and the glory of its Lord. And since June 1, the time at which my work began, I have experienced that support.

A Challenge

At the same time, I was and continue to be aware of the issues which challenge and even threaten an institution such as Dordt College.

Dordt College is a *school*, an academic institution established for the purpose of providing formal education primarily for young people. But schools presently are not being viewed with a great deal of appreciation. A recent *Time* article observes that

Many of America's schools today teach precious little of what students ought to know, and that little ill. . . . Among educators there is a sense of desperation that America's young lack even the rudiments of learning, and a still greater feeling of despair that nothing can be done about it.¹

This is hardly an encouraging note for those associated with a school, i.e., for those involved in formal education.

Further, Dordt is what would be called a *liberal arts* school or college. As such it is to be distinguished from schools described as technical or vocational. But it does not seem that the future of colleges providing "liberal education" is very promising. Just last year Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, wrote as follows:

To question the future of liberal education, not only as it relates to the needs of a single campus but to the world at large as well, is no idle speculation. We seem to be passing through a time when education is the more cherished as it is the more vocational; when learning how to *do* something, rather than . . . how to *be* someone, particularly someone human, is in vogue. Thus we must seriously address the future of liberal education. . . .²

Moreover, Dordt College is known as a *private* college. As such it must be set apart from colleges and universities which are maintained almost solely by means of public funding, are governed by public boards, and are relatively open in terms of their admissions policies. But what are the predictions for private colleges? According to Fred Crossland, a program officer in the Education and Research Division of the Ford Foundation, "There is general agreement

that the most endangered species are the public state colleges and the non-prestigious, tuition dependent private colleges and universities."³ Mr. Crossland would regard Dordt to be a "non-prestigious, tuition dependent private college."

Lest we suppose, however, that Mr. Crossland's predictions reflect a personally negative attitude toward private colleges, we must recognize that similar predictions are being made by statisticians in the confessional community from which Dordt draws the major part of its enrollment. Recently a group meeting in Chicago, Illinois, was informed that enrollment projections are anything but bright for colleges associated with the Christian Reformed Church. Today there are approximately 4,500 Christian Reformed students in these schools. By 1990, if present trends and percentages continue, the Christian Reformed students enrolled in these colleges could be down to 3,000, or thirty-five percent less than the present figure.

Finally, Dordt College would be designated by many as a *Protestant evangelical* college. In this way it would be marked off, on the one hand, from Roman Catholic schools, and, on the other hand, from schools not concerned to base their programs upon the evangelical Christian faith. And how is a Protestant evangelical school being viewed today? With appreciation by some, but certainly not by all.

In 1968 Christopher Jencks and David Reisman co-authored a book entitled *The Academic Revolution* (Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1968). In this work they described with approval a development by means of which college and university faculties have increasingly gained hegemony over a large part of the academy. Freeing themselves from external controls, these faculties have engaged in research, built their departments, lessened student loads, and provided meaningful leadership in society. But there has been one place in particular where this

salutary development has not occurred. According to Reisman in a 1980 publication, *On Higher Education—Origins and Consequences of the Counter-revolution in America* (Jossey-Bass Inc., San Francisco, 1980), there were all along institutions not touched by the “academic revolution,” or touched only marginally. Among these the most outstanding are the Protestant evangelical colleges. The implications are clear. In the eyes of such as Jencks and Reisman, while a Protestant evangelical college may be a safe and secure haven for your children in their formative years, it certainly is not a place where you can expect to find academic leadership, progress, or excitement. For all of these you must look elsewhere.

As stated earlier, these issues seem to threaten the future of an institution such as Dordt College. There is little faith in education as such; the trend is away from the kind of education which Dordt offers; predictions are that enrollments will decrease; and the academic work which Dordt is doing, because of its association with evangelical Christianity, has been termed insignificant. All of which has caused some to ask: Is there a legitimate and necessary place in our society for a school such as Dordt College?

A Conviction

It should surprise no one that my answer to this question is an affirmative one. If it were not, I would have discouraged today's activities and would have done everything possible to avoid my present situation. Yes, I do believe that there is a legitimate and necessary place in our society for an institution such as Dordt College.

But why? And on what grounds?

Do I hold this conviction because I have decided to ignore or reject the predictions being made? No; although I must admit that it was encouraging to read an article by M. M. Chambers in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in which he says that the predic-

tions of impending disaster are “premature, to say the least, and probably wholly wrong.”⁴

Do I possess confidence in Dordt's future because I am aware of ways to meet the impending crisis? Not necessarily; although I did find it helpful to read in *Phi Delta Kappan* Ira Jay Winn's suggestions for ways to deal with the enrollment crunch.⁵

Or is my belief that Dordt has a place in our society based upon a confidence in the future of democracy? Again, no; although I am pleased to know that a large number of people in our democratic society share my conviction. They would argue their case in terms of pluralism—a pluralism which has in mind

. . . the interaction of freely competing interest groups, often operating through lobbies, each exerting pressure upon the state in support of its private cause, with the state acting as an amoral power broker to maintain equilibrium among these many causes.⁶

In this view our society must give place to colleges such as Dordt because they provide a way to balance educational budgets; they increase freedom of choice in education; they provide competition which is healthy for both public and private colleges; and they diminish tensions in regard to differing school policies. I suppose that much of this is true; but this type of pluralism does not yet describe the reason for my conviction that there is a place in our society for Dordt College.

What then is the reason?

I would begin to answer this question by stating that I do indeed hold to a pluralistic view of society; but it is a pluralism which, because it acknowledges the sovereignty of God over all of life, is based on the thesis that “life is religion.” Religion cannot be reduced to a small, cultic segment of life. Religion is the very root of life, for

. . . life in its total extent and in all

its parts is a coherent complex of ongoing responses, obedient and disobedient, to God's claim on the whole man in all his life relationships.⁷

It must not be supposed, moreover, that this thesis that life is religion is the result of an empirical analysis of reality. It is, in fact, the fruit of a deep conviction based upon God's revelation in the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. It is supported by the biblical teaching concerning the Covenant embracing every walk of life as service before the face of the Lord. It is rooted in the biblical view of the Kingdom in which every task is a calling to live *Pro Rege*, i.e. for the King. Rejecting the notion of neutrality and believing that all human activity—including scientific activity—reflects a religious starting point, I wish to share my conviction with you and, in the process, make an academic confession of faith.

According to the Scriptures, in the beginning God created the world in an orderly fashion. Doing so He established the law that was to govern and structure the creation, and gave to each part its own nature and task—making the world a cosmos rather than a chaos. God also created man in His image and called upon man to serve Him by developing the potentialities of creation according to God's law. The sum total of God's demand was that man lovingly serve God with all his heart—his heart being the concentration point of his entire existence. Thus, as Stuart Fowler states, man was to be "distinguished not by his rationality, nor by his moral sense, but by his religious character."⁸

The entrance of sin into human history did not remove man from his responsibility before the face of God. But man refused to acknowledge God's claim upon his life. He responded to God by serving the creature rather than the Creator; and thus man brought the wrath of God to bear upon the entire created order—producing division and strife, misery and death.

Through the death and resurrection of

Jesus Christ the entire creation was redeemed and man could be restored to his position before the face of God. Experiencing the power of Christ's redemption man again saw the meaning of life. He began to consecrate himself to his Creator and Redeemer, so that not only in his worship but in the entirety of his life he was religiously directed lovingly to serve God according to His law and thus "to reclaim every sphere of life for the King."⁹

Man was given an office by God to administer the creation in obedience to the law of the Creator. In fulfilling that office, man was not to work in isolation, but in relationship with others as part of the human community. And, just as it structured other aspects of creation, so the law of God was to structure man's relationship with his fellow human beings.

Initially the human community was undifferentiated; but, as mankind engaged in the work of developing and unfolding the creation, differentiation occurred.

In the early chapters of Genesis, Adam is simply the general worker, equipped for every job, a man of all trades. In time, however, a degree of specialization becomes evident. Cain is a farmer, Abel a herdsman, Nimrod a hunter, Tubal a metal worker, and Tubal-Cain a musician.¹⁰

Throughout history different tasks and task-associations developed within society, according to the creational law of God—which tasks and associations were distinct according to their respective nature and function. In the Old Testament the tasks of the prophet, the priest, and the king come to more clearly differentiated expression. In the New Testament and by the end of the first century the home, church, work, and state are seen as distinct entities. There is today, therefore, according to H. Henry Meeter,

. . . a wide variety of distinct, though related spheres which arise out of the complex life of mankind, each having

its own task to perform, its own mandate entrusted to it by God. Thus there exists the sphere of the family, the sphere of science, of art, of technique and invention, of trade and commerce, of industry, of agriculture, the sphere of the church, and, to mention no more, the sphere of things which belong to society as a whole.¹¹

And within each of these we find a human community working religiously—obediently or disobediently—with a particular aspect of the created order.

Thus we discover in the Scriptures a pluralistic perspective, which embraces the idea of social spheres within society. No sphere is subordinate to another. All spheres exist in a coordinate relationship to each other and are subordinate only to God. And, because they are all subordinate to God, the human communities within these spheres all function religiously before the face of God. Which is to say that life—not in part but the whole—is religion!

One of the spheres in society is the state, called upon to administer justice for all. The state does not act in a religiously neutral way. It functions according to a world-view which constantly shapes its social policy. This being the case, as the authors of *Society, State, and Schools* make clear, the state must face this decisive question:

Which world-view and which accompanying social paradigm offers that state the best promise of living up to its norm and central task, namely, to administer public justice evenhandedly with respect to all social structures and all confessional groups within society.¹²

Another one of the spheres within society is the school, called upon to engage formally in "the process of gaining and transmitting insight."¹³ Religion is not incidental to this activity. In education, too,

... man is fully man—not a mere data manipulator—and as such cannot but choose his ultimate point of reference and rest. This choice determines what he believes concerning himself and the nature of the world around him; it propels, guides and fashions also his theoretical activity.¹⁴

Academic life is religious.

Further it must be noted that the state, because it is to administer justice with respect to all social structures, has a responsibility in regard to the school. It must not dominate the school. Instead it must recognize that the school is a school and that it is the duty of the state to protect the school from external intrusion, safeguarding the school's right to determine its religious direction and to make decisions of an academic nature. The "religious confessional plurality of school systems within society must be granted structural standing before the law."¹⁵

This is not to say that the state may no longer continue to operate the present public school system. But it should remove that system from its privileged status and recognize

... as a matter of just social policy the legal right of each faith community in society to work out its own world-view in a structured program of education.¹⁶

In other words the state should acknowledge that there is a place in our society for a school such as Dordt College—a school seeking in obedience to the Word of God to teach well what its students must know; a college which, although called "liberal arts," endeavors to provide insight which is serviceable in the Kingdom; an institution which, although designated "Protestant evangelical," does seek from a Christian perspective to confront and speak to the issues

of our day.

Yes, there is and there must be a place in our society for Dordt College.

A Call

I realize, however, that simply saying that there is a place in our society for Dordt College does not guarantee the College's continuation in that place. Therefore, while I believe that the future of Dordt ultimately depends upon the blessing and favor of God, I would call upon those of you gathered here this afternoon to join with me in the conviction which I have stated and described.

First, I call upon representatives of the American *public*—especially the political sector—to recognize and support the legitimacy of Dordt's place in society. This will not mean making provision for education which is inferior, because Dordt meets all of the standards which have been set for adequate educational achievement. Nor will this involve a violation of the principle of the separation of church and state. Dordt is not a church; it is a school, a college. Dordt is indeed a Christian college. But that does not mean that it is one of a number of private religious colleges existing alongside public colleges and universities which are non-religious. It means, in light of the perspective which we have articulated, that Dordt is one of a large group of academic institutions, all reflecting a religious world-view, all performing a necessary public service, and all deserving of impartial assistance. And, because Dordt holds membership in that large group, I call upon you to recognize and support its legitimate place in our society.

Second, I call upon other *colleges* and *universities* to acknowledge Dordt's place. We join with you in a concern to render public service. We share with you a desire for academic excellence. Nor would we deny your right to function according to your peculiar world-view. We simply ask you to recognize our commitment to what we call "scripturally-oriented higher education."

Third, I call upon the Dordt College *constituency* to join me in the conviction that there is a place for Dordt College in our society. I gratefully recognize that this beautiful campus, along with its fine faculty and student body, is ample testimony to your past and present commitment. But, because of the problems and challenges mentioned earlier, that commitment is going to be sorely tested in the years which lie ahead. In 1937 you decided to work toward the establishment of a college which would function in harmony with Reformed principles. In doing so you said:

The aim . . . is to give young people an education that is Christian, not merely in the sense that devotional exercises are appended to the ordinary work of the College, but in the larger and deeper sense that all the class work, all the students' intellectual, emotional, and imaginative activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity.¹⁷

I assume that you would say today what you said in 1937. On the basis of that assumption I call upon you to continue to support Dordt College as a visible expression of what you believe to be an obedient response to God's Word for education.

Fourth, I call upon the Dordt *community*—board, administration, faculty, and student body—to recognize that, if we would occupy the necessary and legitimate place described, we must be what we claim we are. In our statement of purpose we declare:

As an institution of higher learning, Dordt College addresses itself to the task of Christian education. It seeks to acquire and transmit genuine Christian insight, that is, to develop and implement an understanding of the entire creation in the liberating light of the Scriptures. Dordt College desires to be an institution of Christian

learning for the benefit of both the attending student body and the entire Christian community, so that the Lord's Kingdom may come to greater expression.¹⁸

This public declaration of purpose involves us in a commitment. Indeed, we are committed to balance the budget, keep the buildings in good repair, maintain high occupancy in the residence halls, preserve a satisfactory student-to-faculty ratio, and meet the demands of the accrediting agencies. But there is more, much more. The realization of our purpose and the maintenance of a distinct place for Dordt College will require that we, with Spirit-wrought energy, unitedly pursue our academic calling taking heed to the Word of God, acknowledging His law to which every aspect of creation is subject, and bowing before the Kingship of Christ in all our scientific work. Only if we are willing to do this may we expect society to recognize our place and the constituents to support us in our place.

A Commitment

I realize that this fourfold summons may appear a bit audacious. I dare to present it, however, because of a personal commitment which I now make public. I promise, in obedience to God, to work hard in the employment of whatever strength and talent God has given me so that Dordt may be and increasingly become a college which serves the needs of society, reflects academic excellence, provides Christian education for covenant youth, and advances the cause of Christian scholarship. I promise, further, to perform my work not as a master but as a servant—aiding you in the fulfillment of your calling. As servant of God in your midst, I want to help constituents come to a clearer understanding of their duty in the sphere of education. I want to assist the Board in setting policies which reflect a biblical direction. I want to aid ad-

ministrators in their supervisory activity. I want to support faculty members in gaining and transmitting insight which will prepare youth for Kingdom service. I want to walk with students as they struggle to discover and develop their talents for the King.

I ask you to support me in this. I ask God to bless me in this—so that not only today but also tomorrow it may be recognized that in society, especially in the Christian community, there is indeed a place for Dordt College.

Notes

¹Richard Stengel, "Quality, Not Just Quantity," *Time*, 6 Sept. 1982, p. 59.

²Theodore M. Hesburgh, "The Future of Liberal Education," *Change*, April 1981, p. 36.

³Fred E. Crossland, "Learning to Cope With a Downward Slope," *Change*, July/August 1980, pp. 22, 23.

⁴M. M. Chambers, "The Future of Higher Education," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 25 Aug. 1980, p. 72.

⁵Ira Jay Winn, "Turning the Screw: Higher Education in the 1980s and 1990s," *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1980, pp. 686, 687.

⁶Rockne McCarthy et al., *Society, State, and Schools* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), p. 31.

⁷Gordon J. Spykman, "Sphere-sovereignty in Calvin and the Calvinist Tradition," in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. David Holwerda (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 165.

⁸Stuart Fowler, *Issues in the Philosophy of Education* (Potchefstroom, Republic of South Africa: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1980), p. 24.

⁹Gordon J. Spykman, p. 166.

¹⁰Rockne M. McCarthy, et al., p. 159.

¹¹H. Henry Meeter, *Calvinism: an Interpretation of its Basic Ideas* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing Company, n.d.)

¹²Rockne McCarthy, et al., p. 166.

¹³*The Educational Task of Dordt College*, by the Dordt College Faculty (Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College, 1979), p. 7.

¹⁴*Scholarship in Biblical Perspective*, by the Association for Reformed Scientific Studies (Hamilton, Ontario, Canada: Guardian Publishing Company Limited, 1965) p. 8.

¹⁵Rockne McCarthy, et al., p. 167.

¹⁶Rockne McCarthy, et al., p. 168.

¹⁷*The Educational Task of Dordt College*, p. 1.

¹⁸*The Educational Task of Dordt College*, p. 8.