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Teaching Technical Engineering Courses from a Christian Perspective: Two Examples

by Charles C. Adams

Abstract
Engineering professors, like those of the natural sciences, usually teach by breaking the subject matter into parts, that is, courses and activities that are logically abstract from each other. While together comprising a coherent whole, those individual parts too easily foster abstractionism, the view that such subjects as calculus, fluid mechanics, engineering design, and engineering ethics “really are” separable from one another. Such a view militates against a Christian perspective of engineering, technology, and reality in general by replacing the organic wholeness of life before the face of God with the compartmentalization that is characteristic of modern science and naturalism.

This paper makes the claim that engineering education—and certainly Christian engineering education—ought to be characterized by wholeness, a quality of integrality whereby the individual courses and activities are organically connected to each other and to the central mission of the educational institution. That claim is first grounded in a number of basic philosophical and theological principles and then fleshed out by the description of two examples. The first example describes a design project included in a sophomore/junior level course in fluid mechanics in which groups of three to five students design a water supply system for a village within a developing country. The second example describes a design problem—the seasonal storage of thermal energy—that may be used in a number of different ways in a senior level course in heat transfer.

Introduction
Early on a sleepy summer morning—in a different century and in a community far, far away—a young Christian engineering professor awoke to continue the task of learning fluid mechanics. As a chemical engineering undergraduate, he had never taken a formal course in that particular subject. But in the coming fall, he was scheduled to teach one to students in the mechanical engineering emphasis.

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of the engineering program at the Christian college where he had been teaching for the past three years. He had learned enough from his undergraduate physics and unit operations courses to make reading through the fluid mechanics text an enjoyable experience. But this particular summer morning, he was confronted by more than just book learning. As he stumbled into the kitchen to prepare a pot of coffee, his nose detected a damp and musty smell that tickled his memory, but not enough to create any specific recognition. An hour later, after two cups of coffee and halfway through the chapter on closed conduit flow, his oldest son ran up the stairs from his basement bedroom, and cried out, “Hey Dad, what’s going on? We’re sinking! Come on down and look!” As the young engineering professor followed his son downstairs, sight enhanced smell to merge memory with perception and bring the vexatious knowledge of a flooded basement to his consciousness. He had been told by the builder that this would never happen because the foundation of the house, a raised ranch, was buried only four feet into the ground. But the house was a “spec house,” and the builder was actually a real estate agent—whose knowledge of soils, foundations, and fluid mechanics was woefully inadequate to predict whether or not a house would suffer water in its basement, four-foot foundation or not. So the engineering professor spent the better part of that day wet-vacuuming the lower level of his home so that his three sons would have a dry place to sleep that night. He also hired a plumber to dig a hole in the foundation floor and install a sump pump to keep the water out of the house.

That evening, he sat down with his fluid mechanics text and designed a piping system that would transport the water, underground, from the discharging pump at the back of the house to the front of the house, where it would flow into the street. Three months later, he was telling this story to the students in his fluid mechanics class as they learned about friction factors, the Moody Chart, and application of the energy equation to systems for closed conduit flow.

The Problem
The flooded-basement story illustrates two important points regarding engineering and engineering education. First, engineering problems are real-life problems with dimensions beyond the numeric and economic. Second, an effective method for teaching engineering is telling stories. Not only do stories usually interest engineering students, but they also merge content with context and confront those students with the holistic nature of engineering problems.

The task of the engineer is to solve practical problems by making use of modern scientific knowledge. Immediately, however, as the story above illustrates, there arises a difficulty with this task. Practical problems are “real world” problems. They confront us with the pre-theoretical and existential wholeness that characterizes our everyday living in God’s creation and before God’s face (coram deo). Modern science, on the other hand, depends upon abstraction. Scientific methodology provides us knowledge of creation by separating—in our minds—our whole, pre-theoretical experience of creation into parts.

In pre-modern technology, the approach to solving a problem, like the problem itself, was characterized by a kind of wholeness and contextuality. Even today, there remains a strong tendency to resort to non-analytical, trial-and-error solution methodologies for technical problems. In small companies, this pre-modern approach is all too common. And every senior design instructor knows well the task of coercing a group of students away from “seat-of-the-pants” engineering toward a methodology that employs careful analysis and informs design with the results of that analysis.

The reality is that scientific analysis has been a powerful tool in the arsenal of the modern engineer. The problem is that the method of scientific analysis is predicated upon an abstract and highly artificial picture of reality. This method of scientific analysis—abstraction—requires one to isolate aspects of a problem in one’s mind, then to perform logical and numerical operations upon those aspects in order to deduce new knowledge of the reality under examination. But that new knowledge is an abstract, scientific kind of knowledge that differs essentially from the pre-theoretical, holistic knowledge from which the situation under study originated. This abstract kind of knowledge works remarkably well for science—the search for understanding—because scientific understanding is, by its very nature, an abstract kind of understanding, a theoretical way of knowing reality that is clearly distinguishable from the way one knows reality in one’s pre-theoretical experience. But—and here is
the heart of the issue—engineering design seeks ultimately to solve “real” problems, not abstract problems. The abstractions that result from the scientific method of analysis are highly stylized pictures of reality. Just as an abstract painting allusively refers to unique characteristics of life in its fullness, so scientific abstractions portray with lucidity several aspects of the natural world while ignoring all other aspects. We see the dimension under study but ignore the context.

To the extent that an abstract educational methodology contributes to narrowness in design, that methodology needs to be questioned and, ultimately, reformed.

Consider the case of the engineering professor with water in his basement. The engineering design in the story was the classic textbook problem of designing a piping system based on pump head, gravity head, and friction losses in a given length and diameter pipe. But the actual problem was far broader than that. It involved the presence of water where water was not wanted, a musty odor, dirty and near-ruined carpet, soggy sheetrock walls, and the communicated discomfort of three young boys. And those were only the immediate manifestations of the problem.

The point is that an engineering design problem is very different from a scientific problem. It is existentially whole as opposed to being abstract. And that difference brings us to the central point of this paper. Science and engineering education have been structured on the basis of science and the scientific method: abstractly. Thus, “courses” are distinct from one another in the curricula of the natural sciences and engineering. Those courses are further abstracted into “subjects,” which are dealt with in “course units” represented by chapters in textbooks. The overall abstract character of this kind of education tends to foster abstract thinking. That kind of thinking is most appropriate for science, and it is often useful in engineering. But engineering problems are not abstract; they are whole, and they are context-laden. Thus, engineering design ought to be characterized by a concern for existential wholeness and context-laden-ness. To the extent that an abstract educational methodology contributes to narrowness in design, that methodology needs to be questioned and, ultimately, reformed.

A Christian Perspective on Engineering Design

A Christian perspective on engineering design and engineering education must necessarily be consistent with a Christian perspective on all of reality. Basic to any Christian perspective on reality is the biblical claim that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” a claim re-articulated in the Apostles’ Creed as “I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” All creatures owe their origin, their continued sustenance, and their final redemption to the Word of God. All share a common non-self-sufficiency and finitude. Thus “reality”—or “creation,” or “the universe”—is of one piece. It is unified, whole, and finite by virtue of its status as “creature” as distinct from its “Creator.” Thus a Christian perspective—and certainly an evangelical Christian perspective—will reject any view that absolutizes a part of reality and separates it from those parts viewed as less than absolute. It will reject, for example, the Greek dualistic view that separated what it believed were the eternal “forms” from the perishable matter that was given temporary existence by those forms. It will also reject the Enlightenment dualistic view that separated mind from matter and held that both, in very different ways, are absolute. And it will reject the modern, monist view of naturalism that considers matter and energy to be all there is—everything else being an explainable manifestation of that basic, eternal stuff that constitutes the universe.

Instead, a Christian perspective will appreciate that the creation is diverse and multifaceted. There are innumerable individual creatures that have existed, presently exist, and will exist before Christ returns. Moreover, there are mind-boggling numbers of “kinds” of creatures. The command given to Adam to name the living creatures suggests both the ordered diversity within creation and humankind’s task in recognizing, respecting, and bringing to verbal expression that diversity. As a result, Christians involved in science and technology will embrace a
multifaceted approach to creation, such that not only are the numerical, spatial, and physical dimensions real (that which naturalism accepts), but so are the dimensions such as the biotic, sensitive, lingual, aesthetic, economic, ethical, and pistic, or faith. Only God is eternal and absolute. But the various dimensions of creation that transcend the “natural” (the numerical, spatial, and physical), though they share the creatureliness and temporality of those dimensions, are just as real as those dimensions and are irreducible to them. In short, a Christian view of reality is multi-dimensional, sees all of creation as composed of God’s creatures, called into being in order to serve him, and sees all human activity as a service to God, neighbor, and the rest of creation.

Engineering design deals, then, with the world in its fullness and not merely our abstract imaginings of the world (i.e., engineering design is distinguishable from scientific theorizing). As such, engineering design must take seriously those aspects of reality beyond the numerical, spatial, and physical. It won’t surprise most engineering educators to hear that their teaching ought to take the economic dimension into careful consideration. The point being made here is that engineering education ought to take into careful consideration all aspects of reality. Engineering problems are “concrete” rather than “theoretical” in nature. And since engineering problems are “concrete, engineering design ought to be characterized by holism rather than abstraction. Therefore, our teaching of engineering design—and engineering education in general—ought to be characterized by holism.

**Demonstrating Wholeness in Engineering Education**

How do we demonstrate wholeness, the quality of integrality whereby the individual courses and activities bear an organic connectedness to each other and to the central mission of the educational institution? How do we engage our engineering students so that not only in the senior design course are they confronted with the integral and multi-dimensional character of reality and with engineering problems, but in the math, natural science, and engineering science courses as well?

**The Subject Matter Approach**

One thing we ought not to do is abandon the “subject matter” approach to the curriculum, an approach that is natural to the thinking process with which we have been created. Since modern engineering builds upon the foundation of natural science, modern-engineering education needs to respect that foundation. The current structure of the curriculum—broken into courses that deal individually with the mathematical, the kinematical, and various expressions of the physical—is a pattern that respects the diversity and irreducibility of the created order. But because good pedagogy goes beyond respecting creational diversity, those courses should somehow be tied together. For the sake of pedagogical integrity, they should exhibit the unity and wholeness of the creation, even as their separate existence exhibits the multi-dimensionality of creation. One way of exhibiting that unity and wholeness is to use a “tapestry” model for the engineering curriculum.

**The Tapestry Model of the Curriculum**

In the tapestry model of the curriculum, different kinds of courses are “threads” woven together to create the whole. When the various kinds of courses are viewed as threads, the individual integrity of the various kinds of courses is respected. Yet the thread metaphor suggests strongly both structure and interwovenness. Just as a thread starts in one place in a tapestry and terminates in another, so a thread of courses in the curriculum has a beginning and an end, often demonstrating a careful prerequisite structure. And most critical to our present considerations, the interwovenness of the threads exhibits the relatedness of kinds of courses to other, different kinds of courses.

Consider the traditional introductory course in differential calculus: Calculus I. In most engineering curricula, it is the first course in the mathematical thread. It serves as a necessary prerequisite to later mathematical courses. Equally important, it prepares the student for work in engineering courses like fluid mechanics, a course within the thermal-fluids thread of most mechanical and civil engineering curricula. The positioning of courses along their respective mathematics and thermal-fluids threads is therefore significant, but mere sequence of positioning is not enough. Too often students who have earned good grades in calculus seemingly lack the ability to apply that knowledge of calculus when the appropriate moment arises in fluid mechanics. It is important, then, for courses to produce an interpenetration of the subject matter, just as it
is important for faculty to produce a tight weaving of threads together in a tapestry. Ideally, the mathematics courses ought to consciously anticipate the engineering courses for which they supply preparation. This anticipation most often occurs in a good differential equations course (especially if it is taught by a member of the Engineering Department). But faculty should consciously design that anticipation into the mathematics course so that the student awaits with eager anticipation the opportunity to use that mathematical knowledge in later engineering situations. In a similar manner, a course in fluid mechanics should consciously recall mathematical knowledge. By this time, several kinds of mathematical knowledge (algebra and geometry) can be taken for granted. However, a good fluid mechanics course will require students, in a conscious and planned manner, to recall and use their knowledge of calculus and differential equations. In a limited but very real sense, calculus should be re-taught in fluid mechanics.

Perhaps more of a challenge (and therefore even more important) is the integration of a course like engineering ethics into the curriculum. One might argue that engineering ethics is a component course in the “Humanities and Social Sciences” (HSS) or “perspectives” thread. A quality course in engineering ethics would require, as a prerequisite, a more general, introductory course in philosophy, or perhaps theology, if the course is taught with sufficient breadth. Similarly, an engineering ethics course ought to prepare students for their senior design-project experience. These courses ought not to be the only points of contact between ethics-related threads and courses. Even the fluid-mechanics course ought to include points where the thermal-fluids and HSS threads are intertwined. An example of such intertwining is discussed at the conclusion of this paper. For now, we can summarize this point by saying that a clearly defined perspectives (or HSS) thread ought to exist in the engineering curriculum at Christian colleges. In addition to the existence of such a thread—containing courses or parts of courses dealing with engineering ethics—there ought to be points of contact between that thread and other threads in the curriculum. Effort should be made to design, into the technical-engineering courses, reflections upon or anticipations of the ethical issues dealt with more substantively in the perspectives (or HSS) thread of courses.

**Teleological Sensitivity**

One simple way of demonstrating the curriculum’s wholeness and organic unity is by ensuring that every course takes the time to reflect upon its central purpose: equipping students to one day deal with and solve real-world engineering problems. We might describe this character of a course as its “teleological sensitivity.” This sensitivity is relatively easy to achieve in design courses, more difficult in engineering-science courses, and extremely challenging in the naturally more abstract courses in the areas of mathematics and natural science. In part, this difficulty can be attributed to the fact that students’ teleological sensitivity will not be achieved by our simply telling the student to “remember, this very abstract concept will be important when you become an engineer.” Rather, every quality engineering course will pay attention to context and incorporate at least some narrative methodology in order to call attention to context.

**In the tapestry model of the curriculum, different kinds of courses are “threads” woven together to create the whole.**

**Context**

Every engineering example, assignment, or assessment problem includes a context, whether that context is stated or not. Too often, “back-of-the-chapter” problems ignore context and thereby encourage the kind of “plug-and-chug” assignment problem-solving methodology familiar to all engineering students. These days, when actually reading the text is done by only the most dedicated students—usually those who are not working 20 hours per week or who have been raised in homes that encouraged reading and discouraged television—one finds that students use their textbooks like handbooks. They first turn to the back of the chapter problems. Identifying the minimal information given in the problem, they then turn to the chapter where the concept central to the problem might be found. Of course they then search for an equation into which they might plug the information given in the prob-
lem. But this methodology treats the engineering student like a computer—as little more than a calculator—and does almost nothing to develop the kinds of holistic problem-solving skills that enable future engineers to solve real-world problems.

Real-world engineering problems occur in context. It is therefore imperative that conscientious, Christian engineering educators provide context for engineering students when they assign homework or test problems. For example, a problem in fluid mechanics—let’s say, in closed-conduit flow—might depend only on the pipe dimensions, the pipe material, and the flow rate desired. A pedagogically well-stated problem, however, ought to include extraneous information like the temperature of the air (assuming no significant heat transfer exists between the environment and the system), the elevation of the system (assuming everything occurs at one elevation), and possibly even some obviously extraneous information, like the day of the week or the current state of affairs in the Middle East—just for fun or to remind students of the need to select relevant information from the whole of the context. But including contextual information need not be accomplished by a crudely artificial listing of facts. Contextual information is best supplied by means of narrative.

Narrative
Narrative, or story-telling, is one very effective way of communicating. It is, perhaps, the most effective way of communicating context while engaging the interest of the person to whom one is communicating. The use of narrative in technical courses can be especially effective for providing context, for creating links with courses in other curricular threads, for thwarting abstractionism, and for promoting a holistic understanding of subject matter that helps Christian engineering students develop comprehensive problem-solving abilities. The following four brief narrative examples were used in fluid-mechanics and heat-transfer courses, at first to elicit student interest. They have since proved even more valuable in helping students contextualize problems for a more holistic understanding of the subject matter:

Water in the basement: The story with which this paper began is not a fabrication. The events occurred in the summer of 1981, and the fluid mechanics course was taught for the first that same fall. That narrative remains an effective way, on the first day of class, to convince students of the practicality of studying fluid mechanics. It also provides a connection between what can be a fairly abstract engineering science course and the much more concrete course in senior design, taken by the students two years later. As will be seen at the end of this paper, the story ends with a final interesting twist, reinforcing the admonition that engineering students consider the broader context of any technical problem.

Water hammer on early TV: In the section dealing with the momentum equation in a fluid mechanics course, most textbooks discuss briefly the phenomenon of water hammer. Some students have experienced the noise of water hammer when a faucet has been closed quickly in an older home or building. A more interesting story was originally told during the mid-1950s on the CBS television drama West Point. In that drama, a group of cadets come from a class—in fluid mechanics, of course—in which they have just learned about water hammer. They decide to run an experiment to test the potential magnitude of the water-hammer effect by synchronizing the time at which they shut off the water supply in a number of bathroom sinks in their residence hall. They succeed all too well. West Point was the first engineering school in the United States, and the piping system that supplies water to the residences halls was already quite old in the 1950s. The result of the synchronized water shut-off was to send a powerful pressure wave back from the faucets in the residence hall, through the piping system under the campus, to the source of the water. The pressure wave was so intense, however, that it ruptured a water main under the sidewalk outside the resident hall. The image of a gusher of water shattering the sidewalk and rising two stories into the air is fixed in the mind of the fluid-mechanics professor, who was ten years old when he saw the TV episode. Depending on the vigor with which the story is told, that image is transferred to the minds of the students and accomplishes far more of pedagogical value than the memorizing (and eventual forgetting) of the equations for water hammer.

Designing the first set of ME lab experiment: During the summer of 1982, members of the first graduating class of engineers at Dordt College, the class of 1983, were hired on a part-time basis to design and build the experiments for the future Mechanical Engineering Design Lab course. Those experiments included a pipe-flow apparatus, a flu-
id-jet-impact apparatus, a convective-heat-transfer experiment, a beam-deflection experiment, and a torsional-stress apparatus. Students were broken up into teams, with one student from each team having “foreman” responsibilities. The teams met once per week with their engineering professor to develop objectives, refine designs, and discuss problems that arose in the construction and testing of the equipment. Telling the story of how those students dealt with each of the assigned lab experiments, encountering and solving various problems, has been very effective in eliciting student interest in the current fluid mechanics and heat transfer courses. For example, in the design of the pipe flow apparatus, the

first design simply used lab tap water as a source which, after exiting the piping, was simply sent to the drain. An immediate problem arose, however, since the source water in the lab was not independent of the water in the rest of the building. Any time a toilet was flushed somewhere in the building, a pressure variation would occur and be transmitted to the sensitive U-tube manometers that measured pressure differences throughout the experimental piping apparatus. Eventually, the apparatus was redesigned with a dedicated pump and reservoir so that extraneous flow perturbations did not affect the experiment.

Designing a home for thermal energy efficiency: The author of this paper has taught heat-transfer and solar-energy engineering for many years at Dordt College. In both courses, stewardship of thermal energy has been an important theme. In the solar energy course, one significant unit is spent on heating-load analysis. In connection with that unit, and as a project, teams of two students go into the community and perform energy audits on select local residences. In a report, students are required to make recommendations to the homeowner for energy-stewardship improvements. After years of reading such reports, the instructor was able to put the knowledge gained to good use. In the summer of 2000, he designed a new home, with a particular emphasis on energy stewardship. The house was built during the 2000-2001 academic year; and in July of 2001, the instructor and his wife moved in. Serving as designer and contractor for one’s own home and working with builders, plumbers, electricians, and city officials will give a person stories to tell. With respect to thermal-energy stewardship, stories dealing with placement of the house on the lot, selection and placement of windows, choice and amount of insulating materials, and selection of HVAC equipment provide the students with a holistic picture of thermal-engineering design. Issues of economics and aesthetics are not easily overlooked, but neither are the psychological, sociological, and ethical issues that arise when one must work with persons holding a different perspective on energy stewardship. Even such an abstract subject as radiation heat transfer can find its way into a story that provides a multi-faceted design context. Narratives achieve a more holistic (and durable) understanding of the Stefan-Boltzmann Law.

Example-1: Design of a water supply system for a village within a developing country
In the Dordt College course EGR 302, Fluid Mechanics, students are assigned a group project (see Appendix 1 for the actual 2005 fall semester project) near the mid-term of the course. In the narrowest technical sense, the objective is to have students gain the experience of designing a pipe flow system. However, the overall objectives of the project assignment are more broad. As with most group projects that require a final report from the group, this project includes important social, communication, and economic objectives. Students gain experience working in teams, communicating with members of the team, appropriating team resources, and dealing with strengths and limitations of team members. Students also gain experience in writing a report and making an oral presentation to the class. In this particular project, students gain experience budgeting for the project—at least in terms of the

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material costs.

Beyond the usual social, communication, and economic dimensions of an engineering problem, students encounter issues unique to meeting people’s needs in a developing country. In the 2000-2001 academic year, the class project was more than merely academic. The problem was to design an irrigation system for the Tolpan Indians in the mountains of Honduras. With support from a number of organizations, the design provided by the fall fluid mechanics class was picked up by a senior design team in the spring. During the winter break, a small team traveled to Honduras to collect data; then, during spring break, a larger team returned to Honduras to construct the irrigation system. Because this project dealt with the basic needs of real people in an actual developing country, students were confronted with unique social, political, and ethical issues. The knowledge required to understand and deal with those issues forced students to draw insights from other sources, including other courses that they had taken or were taking.

Although each fluids mechanics class does not offer students opportunities to work on an actual real-world problem, plenty of available resources provide those necessary real-world connections. For example, ECHO, the Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization, provides a website, http://www.echonet.org/about_echo.htm, where many practical issues are discussed. The evaluation of the final report submitted by students is based not only on how effectively they designed the actual water-supply piping system but on how well they identified and dealt with economic, social, justice, political, and ethical issues. The experience is certainly one that counteracts the abstractionism too often characteristic of standard fluid-mechanics textbooks.

Example-2: Seasonal storage of thermal energy
Sunnyside Manor House, the historic home of Washington Irving,11 overlooks the Hudson River in Tarrytown, New York. Not a castle or a mansion, it is in many ways quite modest. Yet for anyone interested in the history of technology, a visit there will be rewarded with not a few surprises. For in addition to the beautiful landscaping, walking paths, pastures, and gardens, the house, in its day, had running water and a closed-fire cooking stove in the kitchen—advanced technology for the early nineteenth century. But perhaps the most intriguing example of 19th-century technology is found outside the house and just beyond the kitchen yard. At first glance it looks like a tool shed of sorts, except that it is fairly large and built very sturdily. Opening the heavy wooden door and looking inside, one notices that the floor is well below grade level and filled with straw. The walls of the structure seem thicker than the walls in the house. It quickly becomes apparent that this structure was designed to resist heat transfer. Looking at the small map of the Sunnyside Manor property provided each visitor, one discovers that the structure is an ice house, a piece of technology that the modern refrigerator displaced long ago.

The basic principle by which the ice house functions is called seasonal thermal storage: making use of the earth’s orderly rhythms for the purpose of ordering our lives—in the case of the ice house, gathering low-thermal-energy material in the winter, when it is plentiful, so as to meet our need for it in the summer, when it does not naturally exist. We don’t consider this principle much today because we are impatient; we want instant gratification of our desires. And, at least for the past century, we’ve had the technological resources to provide that instant gratification when it comes to thermal-energy storage. The electric refrigerator is a prime example. But our impatience is catching up with us. As traditional petrochemical sources of thermal energy become more in demand, they become more expensive. There were dire predictions of escalating prices for heating fuels for the winter of 2005-2006. Due largely to the mild weather, these price escalations were relatively minor. But space heating in cold climates will become an increasingly difficult problem in the years ahead.

That’s just the kind of problem that can present engineering students with an example of interdisciplinary design—design that goes beyond the abstract concepts of any standard-heat-transfer text and requires students to recognize the social, economic, legal, ethical, and even aesthetic dimensions of a real-world engineering problem.

Consider the possible ways in which seasonal storage of thermal energy might be used to provide space heating for fairly traditional homes in fairly traditional suburban developments in the future. Unlike new houses that are being built now, each with its individual heating system, future homes may be arranged in clusters, and each cluster may
have a centralized heating system that serves all the homes in that cluster—and that heating system would likely combine seasonal storage with solar-energy collection, using petrochemical combustion only as an emergency backup. Consider a typical new housing development of houses on parallel streets, each with about a 100-foot frontage. Each house has one house on either side and another house behind it. A cluster of six houses would have 300 feet of back yard in common. Imagine that where those back yards meet, there might be, submerged beneath the ground, a well-insulated reservoir, filled with water. There might also be a system of solar collectors on the roofs of those six houses and possibly above the reservoir area where the back yards intersect. All year round, but particularly during the summer, solar energy will be collected and stored in that reservoir as hot water. Because the reservoir is large, submerged well beneath grade level, and extremely well insulated, it will not lose much heat, even during the winter. Rather, heat from that reservoir will be pumped into the six homes. At first it will be used to increase greatly the efficiency of heat pumps, devices that use a modest amount of electrical energy to move much greater amounts of thermal energy from one place to another. But as electrical energy gets more and more expensive, the thermal energy from the reservoirs will be used—supplemented by real-time solar energy—to directly heat the six homes in the cluster.

A “back of the envelope” computation will show that such a heating system is technically feasible. Obviously, it would add additional cost to new houses—but not an unreasonable amount. The biggest problem is the sociopolitical problem of getting neighbors to yield a little of their independence, to accept a semi-centralized heating system, probably managed by the local utilities provider. Another issue, of course, is the aesthetics of a solar-energy collector system. But that is nothing new. These are precisely the kinds of issues that make for a meaningful engineering design project—the kind that fosters holistic thinking on the part of students. With the introduction of the historical dimension (Washington Irving’s ice house), the economic dimension (the trade-off between the immediate cost for the system and the future savings of petrochemical costs), the sociopolitical dimension (creating public policy and public consciousness to work together for community wellbeing), and the stewardship dimension (harmonizing the functioning of houses with seasonal cycles, not to mention the environmental benefits of reduced use of petrochemical resources), one has created a rich, interdisciplinary context for solving engineering problems. And, it may be argued, one is well on the road toward developing a Christian perspective on engineering design.

**Conclusion**

This paper began with a story about water in the basement. A fitting conclusion will be to tell the rest of the story. The engineering professor did indeed design the piping system based on his newly acquired knowledge of fluid mechanics. It was installed by the plumbing contractor who had dug the sump pump hole in the basement and installed the sump pump. The system worked beautifully all summer long. When autumn and the new school year arrived, the water table had receded, and the pump became silent. Still, the professor told the story when teaching fluid mechanics for what was the first of many semesters.

But the story isn’t over. The following spring brought rain and a rising water table. Soon the sump pump’s gentle hum was heard as it pumped water from the sump pump hole to the outside of the house. Unfortunately, the engineer only noticed the level in the sump pump hole quickly lowering as the pump did its work; he did not notice that

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the end of the pipe, at the front curb of the house, was only trickling a small amount of water into the street. Then one morning, not all that different from the previous year, the engineer’s morning reading was interrupted by the splashing clamor of his three sons as they informed him that, once again, “the house is sinking.”

There were a few hours of befuddlement as the young engineer tried to figure out what was going on. In the end he came to the realization that the PVC pipe had not been buried deep enough in the ground. As it passed around the back of the house and turned toward the front, the last water from the previous season had frozen during the cold winter—frozen, and as freezing water always does, expanded. The expansion had burst the pipe underground on the opposite side of the house from where it was being pumped. So for a time, the sump pump was pumping the water out of west side of the house’s lower level, only to have it come back in on the east side—the side where his sons’ bedrooms were to be found.

The following fall, the engineering professor told a more complete story to his fluid-mechanics class. Not only could he tell them about a practical application of closed conduit flow, but he could warn them about the perils of abstractionism. By focusing on only one aspect of a problem—in this case the fluid flow aspect—one leaves oneself open to failure in other aspects of a problem—in this case the aspect having to do with strength of materials, specifically that of the PVC pipe. And, of course, those are only two of the most obvious technical aspects to that particular engineering problem. Good engineering design requires that we give consideration to all aspects, technical and non-technical as well.

Endnotes
1. For good general discussions of this difference, see Monsma (1986), and Schuurman (2003). For an in-depth, philosophical analysis of the issue, see Schuurman (2003).
2. Genesis 1:1 (NIV).
3. Psalter Hymnal, 813.
4. Proverbs 8, John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1.
5. See Walsh and Middleton, Chapter 3; Wolters, Chapter 2; Clouser, pp. 43-48.
7. See L. Kalsbeck.
10. See Appendix I.
11. Washington Irving (1783-1859) was the author of Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.
12. In April of 1991 the American Public Power Association (APPA) awarded a $3,000 scholarship to Curtis Smit and Scott Hulstein, two Dordt College engineering seniors, who worked under the supervision of the author on a project (their senior design project) that investigated the feasibility of a four-home seasonal storage scheme in Northwest Iowa.

References
Adams, Charles C. An Analysis and Solution to the Two-Cultures Problem in Undergraduate Engineering Education (Ph.D. Thesis), Graduate College, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, 1996.

Appendix I
ENGR 302 FLUID MECHANICS: DESIGN TAKE-HOME TEST, Fall 2005
Group: 1 (Student #1, Student #2)
You are to design a fresh water supply system for a village in Nicaragua. The source of energy for pumping the water will
be solar, so it will be important to utilize a water tower both to stabilize the source pressure and to provide for flow when the sun is not shining. The village is rectangular in shape, approximately 0.5 miles wide (E-W) by 1.0 miles long (N-S). At this stage in their history, the people in the village have not constructed permanent housing. Therefore your water supply system should be designed to provide a single supply valve with the capacity of 3.0 gpm at 20 relatively evenly spaced locations within the village. The supply for the water is a lake which is fed by streams from the mountains. The surface of the lake is at an elevation 20 feet above the village and 2 miles to the west (of the village border). The village is in a valley, however, and an excellent site for the tower exists on a natural plateau on a mountain 3 miles to the north (of the village border) at an elevation 35 ft above that of the village.

Your supplies can be purchased at the Farmers Co-op here in Sioux Center, or you may find a vendor by searching the Web for the lowest prices. In any case, the supplies will be transported free of charge by a PLIA group during spring break. The PLIA group will also construct the water system during a summer vacation.

You are to design the least expensive, functional system possible. Determine all pipe sizes and lengths as well as their layout. Determine all fittings necessary. What size pump is needed? You do not need to design the solar energy system, but you do need to specify the power that will be required of it.

Your completed project must include a parts list complete with prices, total price, and specifications; a carefully labeled drawing of the system; and a page or so in which you discuss the characteristics of the system and any peculiarities that you think should be known. In a separate section you should discuss the social and political situation. E.g., what social, political, or economic problems (other than simply raising enough money for the project) might you encounter?

Providing fresh water to small communities in developing countries is not something novel. Various groups have done it before. Therefore you should do some preliminary research (consider using the Web) to find out what has been done and what kind of difficulties (technical, social, political, etc.) have been encountered.

You are to work in groups of three students each (actually there will be five groups of three students and one group of two students). Thus the work can be shared. This means, however, that a solid, comprehensive, final report is expected of you. In addition, every member of the group must understand every aspect of the project. In other words, the final report is not to be a collection of individual parts, but rather a representation of the knowledge of all members in the group. During the “Group project work” day (December 6) class time will be spent by having each group make an informal (10 minute) presentation to the class regarding the project. The presentation will involve presenting the results to date and fielding questions. The time between the presentation and the deadline for submittal of the project should be spent, if at all, only polishing the project (putting it in final form). The bulk of the work should be completed before exam week.

(Final note: At the end of the semester you will be asked to evaluate this group effort. That evaluation will include evaluating the effort of each member of the group. I will take seriously those evaluations and apportion the project grade accordingly.)
Hungering for a New Politics: Gerald Vandezande’s Reformational Gifts to Politics

by John Hiemstra

Gerald Vandezande was a towering figure in Christian political action in Canada, and he also had significant contacts and influence in the USA and the Netherlands. He considered himself a Christian in the Kuyperian tradition and acknowledged Christ as Lord and center of life. He was deeply reformational, having been heavily influenced in early life by Professor H. Evan Runner, a philosophy professor at Calvin College. Yet, amazingly, Christians from all faith traditions and within every political party consulted, debated, quoted, and often admired Gerald. In policy development and advocacy, he collaborated with Evangelical, Ecumenical, and Roman Catholic Christians, as well as with interfaith groups and political partisans of all stripes. He received the prestigious Order of Canada in 2001, citing his “powerful and respected voice for social justice.” Gerald Vandezande passed away July 16, 2011: His public-justice work is sorely missed.

But what exactly was Gerald Vandezande’s contribution? Strikingly, he was first and foremost an activist, not a political philosopher or academic, as leaders generally are in the Reformational tradition. Gerald didn’t attend university during World War II Europe, not having that opportunity, but he intuitively and dynamically grasped Christian social and political thought. Since he published only a handful of articles and books, it is difficult today to figure out what made him such an effective and engaging Christian in politics. This article identifies several key features of Gerald’s contribution by offering a short reflection on his influences on me. It shares the gems of insight many of us received from him over the years. This is not an overview of Gerald’s life story and accomplishments; you can find that in an excellent story in Faith Today.¹

A friend and mentor
Gerald Vandezande first caught my attention when

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he spoke at Dordt College, where I was a student between 1974 and 1978. He became a friend, colleague, and mentor to me over the years and taught me a great deal about doing public justice. His deep and expansive Christian vision—and dynamic grasp of the Reformational tradition of social and political philosophy—drew me in. I had the privilege of working alongside him for six years in Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ), a Christian organization he co-founded in Canada (with John Olthuis and others). Later, we worked together on a variety of policy-advocacy projects, as I served on the board of CPJ, for which he worked. We continued to stay in regular contact over the last twenty years when, as a professor of political studies at the King’s University College, I drew him and his case studies into my political science courses. Astonishingly, each time Gerald spoke, he gave us new and fascinating things to learn! From my experience, here are several of Gerald Vandezande’s reformational gifts to politics.

**Anti-intellectualism**

Gerald’s anti-intellectualism challenged and critiqued the reformational philosophical and theological tradition, which has produced a variety of very valuable insights into social, economic and political life. I was fortunate to have received first-class training in these ideas while at Dordt College. When I started to publicly engage policy issues, however, I was puzzled that several friends criticized my approach. I thought it reflected the best of reformational thinking. Eventually, it was Gerald who helped me recognize the pitfalls of intellectualism in my policy-making approach.

Intellectualism is a temptation and challenge for all theoretical communities, not just the reformational tradition. In a nutshell, the problem of intellectualism in policy-making goes something like this. A policy problem is identified and analyzed by being lifted and abstracted from its complex, real-life setting. Theory and distinctions are used to understand the problem. Christian principles are then applied to these abstract conclusions in order to shape and construct a Christian policy solution. This solution is then brought back into the integral, practical reality of everyday life and policy debate and advocated as the best solution. Too often, however, in spite of some strong insights, the intellectualism of this approach produces either an inappropriately abstract or disengaged policy solution or, worse, gets side-tracked in philosophizing and never actually gets around to constructing or advocating a concrete policy option at all.

**Strikingly, he was first and foremost an activist, not a political philosopher or academic, as leaders generally are in the reformational tradition.**

While speaking at Dordt in the mid-1970s, Gerald discussed CPJ’s (Canada) approach to the northern Mackenzie Valley Pipeline debate that was raging in Canada.² While clearly enriched and deepened by reformational thinking, I saw CPJ working with a dynamic and engaging approach, not intellectualism, to tackle the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline debate. I was hooked! CPJ tackled this problem in such a way that their concrete policy solutions, based on an integral, biblically-based vision, could actually be adopted by the government. Significantly, Gerald also opposed intellectualism in other areas of life, including scholarship, labour relations, and theology.

**Discerning the deeper religious visions**

Gerald’s anti-intellectualism was based on his belief that intellectualism fails to adequately discern the deeper ideological and religious convictions that contribute to, or shape, public problems and solutions. The reformational tradition is well known for suggesting that “life is religion.” Gerald emphasized this point practically by arguing that in all projects, we need to ask, “Where are things going?” “Where are people taking their projects and developments?” “What is the deeper, underlying thrust of a particular development?”

That deeper, underlying thrust often involves ideologies. Ideologies—or “isms,” as Gerald liked to refer to them—are a species of religion. Ideologies
become pseudo-religions when people expect “too much from a good thing.” Ideologies spring into life when we become obsessed with achieving a good “goal” (in “God’s good creation,” he would say). This obsession drives us to confer far too much power and leeway on the “means” we choose to achieve this goal. We then end up spinning ideologies—collections of words, stories and explanations—to rationalize and justify the distorted and unjust actions (means) we take to achieve the goal. Since life is religion, Gerald argued, we need to be constantly alert and discerning about whether, and how, ideologies may be directing and shaping our behaviours, structures, and policies.

**Living intimately with Scripture**

Gerald lived closely with Scripture and in prayer. His faith inspired him to oppose dead-end ideologies in daily public-affairs work. While he rejected the idea that quoting Scripture makes policy advocacy “Christian,” he often used Scripture in his speeches. When communicating in certain types of public events, he insisted, we must show the audience why and how we arrived at the specific vision and policies we are advocating. He called this a form of “structural evangelism.” For example, his use of Psalm 146 at the end of his book *Justice Not Just Us* reverberates with, and deepens, the public-policy arguments made throughout the book.

At the heart of Gerald’s reading of Scripture was the idea of a “Way” orientation. Scripture is not a set of moral rules or abstract doctrines or rationalist principles. Rather, Scripture is the liberating meta-narrative of the Gospel that points out the “Way.” The story of redemption is a “Way” to walk, a “Way” of faithfulness and healing in God’s creation. As Gerald’s close friend Bob Goudzwaard says [in a video address at the memorial service], Scripture offers our lives direction; it marks out “sign posts” to guide our daily social and political living, to keep us on the right course. In another context Bob puts it this way: in the Old Testament the “Torah means first and foremost a path to walk on, a ‘direction’, a route secure from harm. It is the path along which blessings come.”

This understanding of Scripture led Gerald to steer clear of any approach to policy that involved working out a static, detailed blue-print for action. In his words,

> My intent is not to provide a social handbook, an economic blueprint, or a political manual that pretends to give all the answers. Rather, I attempt to outline a Christian view of social, economic, and political responsibility that will enable us to respond to the crisis of our times with hope and vision. I do so from the conviction that the message of God’s creation and Christ’s incarnation is good news and of crucial significance for our everyday life.

For him, the “Way” orientation of Scripture provides a truly relevant and dynamic guide for steering us in and through the concrete struggles and circumstances of life, including political life.

**Importance of structural analysis**

Alongside his emphasis on faith and Scripture as key motivators in policy-making, Gerald also reminded us that it is critical to analyze the structures and systems that cause the problems we try to tackle, whether poverty, inequality, family breakdown, religious oppression, or exploitation. We should not attribute these problems exclusively to flawed vision, wrong beliefs, lack of personal responsibility, or false motives. Structures and systems have the power to profoundly influence our lives, precisely because at some earlier point, deeper human beliefs and visions have shaped them. Deformed and oppressive structures and systems can cause massive problems in society. Thus, he argued, we should engage in an “architectonic critique” of structures. Engaging policy problems needs to involve both analysis of structures and systems and concurrent probing of the deeper faith and ideological motivations.

**When in politics, act politically!**

Gerald was a master at politics and profoundly grasped what it takes to do politics well. When Christian communities face a secular public square, they often tend towards one of three responses: (i) acquiesce and pull out, (ii) acquiesce and participate in politics as though it were a common neutral realm, or, (iii) challenge neutral secularism with robust Christian reflection and discernment of issues. While favouring the latter approach, Gerald warned that it too had dangers if we simply formed Christian political organizations and publicly de-
clared Christian principles in response to problems. Rather, he believed we need to challenge neutral secularism by doing politics!

In class, I tell my students that politics is the activity of persuading people to support or dissuading people from supporting a common public project or law, often led by a government. By its nature, politics is a rapidly unfolding, dynamic process. Many issues and problems are tackled simultaneously, and often there is only a brief window of opportunity to engage in the politics of a particular issue before politicians move on, either addressing or shelving the issue. While Christian principles and theoretical frameworks for society and politics are critical, Gerald argued, they should not displace or side-track genuine, ongoing engagement with politics and policy-making. Too often, he warned, Christian communities put the development of Christian principles and the theoretical reflection on political reality ahead of the hard work of political action, and thus they fail to do politics. The health and wellbeing of our neighbours depend on a just shaping of policy through active politics.

Activism is a dead end
While emphasizing action, Gerald also repeatedly encouraged justice activists not to slip into a spirit of “activism,” and thereby burn out. Activism suggests an attitude that the outcomes of our work depend solely on us. Ultimately, he advised, the antidote for activism is the recognition that our action simply joins in, and follows, the work God-in-Christ is already doing to renew creation and life.

Sphere sovereignty, or differentiated responsibility
Central to Gerald’s Christian social and political thinking was the principle of “sphere sovereignty,” which he often referred to as “differentiated responsibility.” (This principle is similar to the notion of subsidiarity in Catholic social thought.) Basically, it suggests that the various associations and institutions of society are shaped and tasked by God differently in order to accomplish unique functions required by society. I learned from Gerald that this principle is only one of several principles at work in societal life, and thus it needs to be dynamically balanced with others such as “the interconnectedness of social life,” “solidarity,” and the “common good.”

Furthermore, Gerald emphasized that “differentiated responsibility” must be understood dynamically, not statically. Different spheres of life—family, business, unions, schools, government, and so forth—should not be seen as autonomous or untouchable spheres, surrounded by unbridgeable boundaries. This is how liberal ideology portrays them when it poses a “wall of separation” between church and state, or a “wall of separation” between the free market and government. The notion of unbridgeable boundaries between spheres leads to distortions and a static understanding of society. Rather, Gerald argued that sphere sovereignty means that the central calling and task of an institution come from God, and since they do, the institution’s primary responsibility is to respond to that calling and task. However, should a sphere/institution fail to perform its task or abuse it or oppress others, then other appropriate institutions—including the state—have the duty to “interfere” in the name of justice and to enable and restore this calling and task.

Public justice approach
At the heart of Gerald’s political ministry was the idea that God calls government to a specific type of justice, namely, “public justice.” He contrasts public justice to types of justice practiced in other areas of life, e.g., family justice, justice within business, ecclesiastical justice, educational justice, and so forth. In light of the principle of “differentiated responsibility,” Gerald also stressed that citizens and other political office-holders in the political

For him, the “Way” orientation of Scripture provides a truly relevant and dynamic guide for steering us in and through the concrete struggles and circumstances of life, including political life.
sphere should always be busy discerning the nature of government’s public-justice task for each time and place. In fact, it is a Christian duty to engage fellow politicians and citizens in the process of discerning government’s distinct role in areas such as eradicating poverty, accommodating pluralism, or pursuing ecological justice.

The heart of government’s public justice role, Gerald argued, is the God-given calling to balance, harmonize, and publicly-legally integrate the public claims of people, communities, and organizations so that they might flourish together within societal and ecological systems. Governments carry out this role through laws, policies, and programs that they develop based on public debate. Gerald was instrumental in helping Citizens for Public Justice (Canada) devise the Guidelines for Public Justice. These guidelines—including, human dignity, mutual responsibility, economic equity, social justice, environmental integrity, and fiscal fairness—were meant as a contribution to discerning government’s public justice task of harmonizing people, communities, organizations and ecosystems within the “common good.”

From issue-oriented to integrated policy
Another insight Gerald bequeathed us was the idea that we need to engage in integrated policy-making. We often use the term “issue” to focus on a policy action, and Gerald did too. But, he increasingly rejected an issue-oriented approach to policy analysis and advocacy. While an issue-oriented approach helped us focus on concrete problems rather than stalling out on abstract theories, such an approach also runs the danger of encouraging us to tackle problems in isolation. In reality, problems frequently emerge out of a coherent “way of life” in the interconnected whole of everyday reality. Truly effective solutions require us to understand how these problems are intertwined with, as well as impact, other areas or “issues” of life. Gerald’s integral policy-making approach grew out of a multi-dimensional understanding of reality, based on his belief that all of creation and history cohere in Christ (Col 1).

Broad agenda
Gerald avoided developing a single-issue political organization, as the campaign mentality in the Christian community so often produces, e.g. the temperance or abortion movements. His public-justice vision led him to advocate a general political organization (CPJ) that works on a broad agenda. While happy to tackle problems as diverse as abortion, peace, ecology, family and economic issues, Gerald believed that a Christian public philosophy offers healing solutions for a wide range of public problems. He actively tackled problems across the political spectrum, such as, poverty; religious freedom; justice for aboriginal First Nations [Native-Americans]; ecological sustainability; defining marriage; multi-cultural and multi-faith justice; pluralistic school policy; economic justice and sufficiency; social equity, inclusion and solidarity; and many more.

Guidelines for Socio-economic Responsibility
Gerald strongly believed that God’s norms, discerned in the good creation through the light of Scripture, must guide and shape all human decision-making if we are to flourish. We must not ignore norms, pay attention to only favourite norms (e.g. efficiency), or twist their inner content. Norms and values should not be after thoughts but must function as effective guides and starting points for living. Healthy social, economic and political practice depends on faithful listening to norms and values. Furthermore, all norms and values must be responded to simultaneously in our daily life decisions.

Citizens for Public Justice’s (Canada) “Guidelines for Socio-economic responsibility” were the outcome of a process of reflecting on how norms might shape socio-economic decision-making. These guidelines stimulated fresh and exciting thinking about how values might guide living and policy in many NGOs that cooperated with CPJ. I have often used these guidelines in my university courses with great success.

Always a positive agenda
Gerald had an amazingly positive attitude to politicians and public life. While he is well-known for prophetic critique and passionate speeches, his biggest emphasis was to encourage people to frame their critique around a positive solution. His favourite phrase for describing this approach was “ex-
pose, oppose, propose”!

**Openness to learning from other traditions**

Gerald’s approach to other faith traditions was complex. He believed government must deal justly with all **bona fide** faith groups in society, that is, all groups that do not promote violence or the overthrow of society or advocate religious or racial hatred. Government policies dealing with difference and plurality in society, he argued, must “do justice to all and discriminate against none.”

The belief in God’s good creation and common grace, however, also led him to emphasize that we can learn from other faiths, traditions, and movements who share life in God’s creation. For me, Gerald modeled a bold approach to open but faith-grounded dialogue. He borrowed widely from various Christian traditions, including liberation theology, just peacemaking, subsidiarity, social gospel, evangelical social action, and the common good. But his deepest convictions also led him to openly engage and discerningly borrow from various non-Christian faith groups and secular movements. They too discover truth as they live under God’s benevolent and patient care for creation.

**Policy coalitions across interfaith/inter-ideological lines**

There are healthy and unhealthy ways of cooperating across ideological, faith, and partisan lines. Gerald modeled a healthy form, in which coalitions become possible if the practical aims, policy goals, or agenda items of various groups overlap. When policy-overlap occurs, a window of opportunity opens to shape a coalition around these specific points. Respectful cooperation works when each group is able to arrive at these common positions from out of its own faith convictions and reasoning.

Policy coalitions will unravel or collapse, however, if they do not limit the scope of their actions to the overlapping agreement and do not respect the distinctive reasoning by which various coalition participants arrive at these common positions. An unhealthy coalition will insist that all member groups agree on a deeper foundation for cooperation, forcing them to accept a common secular or rationalist basis. This requirement threatens the unique starting points and identities of the cooperating groups.

**Conclusion**

The policy outcomes of Gerald’s creative vision and persistent advocacy are still a benefit to many Canadians. Many involved in public offices and political vocations still reflect on having been blessed by his wise counsel and support. Personally, I am deeply thankful for Gerald’s friendship, vision, and practical public ministry. His mentorship was truly a gift of grace in my political and academic work.

Not all of the above points are original to Gerald, and he would not have claimed so. But they certainly embody a distinctive style and approach to public-justice advocacy and ministry. As such, they were Gerald’s reformational gifts to politics and public life. His insights and actions continue to hold promise for making our political actions more faithfully and distinctly Christian—and effective.

**Endnotes**


On the Edge of Our Seats: The Educational Opus of Dordt College

by Erik Hoekstra

Students, faculty, staff, members of the board, and faithful friends of Dordt College: Thank you for coming today to celebrate God’s continuing provision for leadership at Dordt College. As we gather to commemorate the beginning of a new presidency, I want you to know that I take this appointment seriously. In keeping with the college motto, *Soli Deo Gloria*, I also want to declare that the continuation of leadership at Dordt College and this celebration today center on God alone.

As a welcome and a context for this morning, let’s look at Paul’s opening words in his letter to the Philippians. They reflect my sense of this place and frame the start of my service as the fourth president of Dordt College:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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.

Paul’s salutation is a fitting context for our work here. Dordt College is a work that God started in 1955, when a group of men and women saw Christian higher education from a distinctively Reformed perspective as the logical next step—after having founded churches and Christian day schools—in faithfully following the first and greatest commandment: to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

From the very beginning, this college was envisioned as a comprehensive Christian college, working toward Christ-centered renewal in every area of life because the founders also wanted to obediently honor the second commandment: to love their neighbors as themselves.

As Dordt College grew, its leaders affirmed the place and authority of Scripture as a guide for its work. The early foundational document, *Scripturally Oriented Higher Education*, later rewritten and called *The Educational Task of Dordt College*, beautifully and coherently lays out the biblical rationale for...
both the *why* and the *how* of a Christian college committed to the Reformed perspective. It answers, through the lens of Scripture, this question: What is the work of a Christian college?

A task means that we owe; an opus means that we respond with joy. A task means that it is imposed; an opus means that we freely give. A task has the sense of a minimum standard; an opus has the sense of excellence as our marker.

In my association with Dordt College, first as a faculty member and then as provost, I have developed a deep respect for the Educational Task document and consider it the keystone to the solidity of Dordt’s mission and vision throughout the history of the college. As president, I intend to have the Educational Task remain vibrantly alive in our daily work so that we may remain true to our calling.

Today, I’d like to lead you in thinking creatively for a few minutes about the educational task of Dordt College.

Most of my academic training is in the area of work: people at work, organizations and how they work. I’m a student of work. A few years ago I did some writing about a Christian view of flourishing at work, beginning by thinking and studying the word itself. The Latin root for work is the same as that for the word urge: an exertion that wears you out, or to press hard, push, drive, or compel.

Task, a synonym for work, also has an interesting etymology. Task shares a root with tax, as in something owed as an obligation or a piece of work imposed as a duty, or to burden and put a strain on something.

My Reformed sensibilities don’t allow me to think of our work simply as an obligation or something that we owe as payment. From my Reformation history course, I remember that the concept of “good works” and church members paying indulgences as something they owed was one of the 95 items that Martin Luther was upset about that afternoon, October 31, 1517.

Since redemption comes from Christ alone and by grace alone, we don’t owe anything, it seems to me. Therefore, I find myself bristling a bit at the title Educational Task, as though our work is a tax or obligation that we owe or something that we can somehow pay.

I love the content of the Educational Task, and I consider it an essential tool to ensure that Dordt College doesn’t go the way of many Christian colleges whose light has either died or faded over the past decades, but I wonder whether a more appropriate title for the document might be the Educational Opus of Dordt College.

The Purposes Committee of this college spent many hours plumbing the depths of God’s Word to get it right. It is an outstanding document that we will continue to use to qualify board members, hire faculty, and measure ourselves against. But today, I want to suggest that perhaps it could be crowned with a more fitting title.

Opus is another synonym for work. The root of the word opus is related to opera and defined as a gift of gratitude offered in thanks rather than an obligation imposed as a payment. Opus is an effort to produce in abundance—originally related to agriculture, later extended to artistic and other activities.

You may be thinking, “That’s just semantics. I don’t care what you call it; work is work.” But I think this is about more than semantics. It’s about the *why* and the *how* of our work here together. A task means that we owe; an opus means that we respond with joy. A task means that it is imposed; an opus means that we freely give. A task has the sense of a minimum standard; an opus has the sense of excellence as our marker. A task says that we’re strapped down in our seats until we’re done; an opus says that we’re on the edge of our seats in order to serve.

As of this week, with my daughter’s birthday, I am the parent of four teenagers. The distinction
between task and opus also affects her work as a student. A task frames her work as “I have to do my homework.” An opus says “I get to do my homework.”

The Heidelberg Catechism, as it often can be, is helpful here. It begins by asking What is your only comfort in life and in death? Another way to ask the question might be this: How can you even get up in the morning and go to work, whatever that work might be?

The response, which I’m sure many of you in attendance today could say with me, is this:

That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

You might almost think, “Hey, this sounds pretty good. It’s almost like there isn’t any work for me to do at all. Sounds to me like Christ did it all.” And you’re right. The real work in God’s covenant of grace was fully done by Christ’s shed blood. The tax is fully paid. We have no obligation under the law any longer.

But then, before we can relax—in a truly Reformed spin on life—the answer isn’t complete quite yet. Just when we start to confuse our comfort with getting comfortable, the catechism makes a dramatic turn and finishes in this way:

Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

I’ve always loved those words of the catechism: Wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we can have comfort, to be sure, but it’s not the type of comfort that encourages us to slouch back in our seats and leave it all up to him. It is the type of comfort that assures us of God’s sovereignty and providence, of the Savior’s death and resurrection for us, and of the Spirit’s daily work of counsel and peace in us.

In response to that great comfort, we are asked to move to the edge of our seats and participate wholeheartedly in a ready and willing posture, to work for God. That sounds more like opus work than task work to me. The catechism makes clear in the narrative of God’s creating the world and our falling away from God in sin that God’s redemptive work in us and his creation through Christ is work that is already done, but not yet complete. Our work does matter to God.

The comforting conclusion to this answer clearly has a sense of action to it. It’s the kind of comfort that allows us to sit confidently on the edge of our seats, getting to work wholeheartedly, with everything we’ve got, ready and willing to live for him. Wholeheartedly ready and willing to live for Christ feels a little like orchestra members just before a symphony begins, sitting on the edge of their seats, poised with eagerness and expectation, knowing that something beautiful is going to happen.

The idea of participating in Dordt’s educational opus gets my heart pounding and moves me to the edge of my seat. An opus is creative, fruitful, flourishing, and extravagant. I challenge you today to think about the development of Dordt College as an opus of thanksgiving to God for his great love for us in Christ Jesus and to move to the edge of your seat and commit with me to the joyous work that is before us.

For students, solving calculus problems, creating sculpture in an art studio, and writing comparative essays on Augustine and Aristotle for Core 140 can at times, I’m sure, feel like a task. For faculty, attending committee meetings, grading papers, and embracing new teaching methods can sometimes be taxing. For those in admissions and advancement, weeks on the road visiting high schools or donors, making phone calls to recruit students or raise money can wear on you, just a bit. To maintenance and other college support staff, the behind-the-scenes work you do each day to make this college so
wonderfully run can feel tiresome, I’m sure.

But through Christ’s death and resurrection all of this work can and should be done with joy and comfort and purpose. We have been called here together and have been given the opportunity to live in thankfulness for what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

Let’s pursue our educational opus at Dordt College with imagination and cheer and, as we do so, people around us will notice that Christians at Dordt do amazing things and do them with joy. They will observe that Dordt’s community is intriguingly and invitingly Christian, humbly and hospitably Reformed, and intellectually stimulating. We will continue to become, more and more, a flourishing Christian college community. Our educational opus will produce Christ followers, culture renewers, world shapers, community builders, difference makers.

The distinctive educational opus of Dordt College blends academic rigor and technical credibility with a biblical worldview integral to life and learning in every corner of our campus and beyond. Fewer and fewer colleges today can make the claim that they seek to be biblically serious, occupationally relevant, and thereby equip students as whole persons for service as disciples of Jesus Christ. But that is Dordt’s educational opus and will continue to be so, God helping us.

Abraham Kuyper, whose thinking has helped give substance and shape to our opus here at Dordt, spoke eloquently of that invitation: “God’s honor,” he said, “requires the human spirit to probe the entire complexity of what has been created, in order to discover God’s majesty and wisdom.”

“The Savior of the world is also the Creator of the world,” as Kuyper notes. “Therefore any view confining God’s work to the small sector we might label ‘church life’ must be set aside.... That work encompasses the whole life of the world...and instead of monastic flight from the world the duty is now emphasized of serving God in the world, in every position in life.”

This world is where we live and serve. Culture does matter. We are called to participate in culture in ways that become signposts of the coming kingdom of Christ, in ways that give glimpses of how things “ought to be,” in ways that give glimpses of shalom. That is our life’s holy work, our opus.

Finishing where we started then, I offer you Paul’s further words to the Philippians:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Love abounding in knowledge and deep insight. Engaging hearts and inquiring minds to better know and understand the world God created for us to steward and enjoy: that’s a magnificent opus for a college such as ours.

As president, following in the formidable footsteps of the Rev. B.J. Haan, Dr. J.B. Hulst, and Dr. Carl E. Zylstra, I hope to lead you faithfully in doing this work. I am indebted to these three for their faithful leadership in the past. They set the foundation for this place that we now inherit with a responsibility to grow and develop for God’s glory.

I am grateful to each one of you for coming here today to celebrate God’s continuing work at Dordt. As president, following in the formidable footsteps of the Rev. B.J. Haan, Dr. J.B. Hulst, and Dr. Carl E. Zylstra, I hope to lead you faithfully in doing this work. I am indebted to these three for their faithful leadership in the past. They set the foundation for this place that we now inherit with a responsibility to grow and develop for God’s glory.

I am grateful to each one of you for coming here today to celebrate God’s continuing work at Dordt College. I encourage you to take comfort in the assurance that the work we do, the opus God has put in front of us, is already completed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We have come beyond the day of small beginnings. Our world and life view is pervasive. Our vision must be as large as our calling. Let the opus offered to God be our collective act of obedient service for the King.
Today, I encourage you to join the Educational Opus of Dordt College by moving up to the edge of your seat in eager expectation, ready and willing to live for him. Working alongside your brothers and sisters, may you become equipped more and more each day to work effectively for Christ-centered renewal in all areas of life.

As we do so together in the days and years ahead, I pray that God’s will may be done, and his kingdom may come, here on earth more and more as it already is in heaven. And may any glory that comes from our opus go not to us, but only and always and solely, as our college motto states, to God alone.
Embracing Popular Culture’s Fascination with Mythology

by Jeremy Larson

Ubiquity
When the last *Harry Potter* book was released to a frenzied fan base in 2007, one literary historian searched the past for a comparable work that attracted such zealous devotees, and what she uncovered was Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop.*\(^1\) Dickens’s novels were released as serials in England, a publication process typical for that time, so audiences had to wait for weekly or monthly installments. As the last shipment reached American shores in 1841, impatient fans beset the ships and demanded to know if little Nell was alive.\(^2\) Stories have the power to excite us, and it is axiomatic that people love stories. But I want to consider a specific kind of story: myth.\(^3\)

The ubiquity of mythology in our culture is undeniable, as our days of the week and some of our months will readily attest. Even our everyday allusions are infused with references to pagan gods and demigods. For example, it is common to hear a football commentator use “Achilles heel” to describe a losing team’s inability to convert on the fourth down.

In addition, children’s literature has enjoyed somewhat of a mythological renaissance. Trending characters such as Harry Potter and Percy Jackson are actually newcomers—Lucy Pevensie and Bilbo have been around for more than fifty years. Ironically, even atheists have their own fantasy series by Philip Pullman, who designed the *His Dark Materials* trilogy as an attempt to counterbalance the overt theism in C.S. Lewis’s Narnia chronicles. Perhaps Christians should take it as a compliment that an atheist felt the need to copy Lewis. Usually, Christians are the ones to create pop culture knock-offs,\(^4\) and the Christian ghetto is teeming with such silliness. We’re often the ones copying others, but recently I saw a bumper sticker that read, “Ankh if you love Isis!” Look, people are finally copying us!

Apology
Despite the widespread use of mythology by

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Christians in the past—even the recent past—many Christians today have an aversion to mythology and view it through narrowed eyes. But many Christians have seen mythology as something to be commandeered. In J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, dwarves hire Bilbo as a “thief,” but he is not really stealing so much as he is reclaiming stolen treasure. The gold and jewels were not Smaug’s to begin with. Centuries earlier, Augustine spoke of such re-usurping as “spoiling the Egyptians.” Just as the Israelites exited Egypt laden with Egyptian treasure, Christians have every right to take truthful elements from pagan culture. Truth that has been mined from God’s creation “must be removed by Christians” and “put back into the service of Christ.” Furthermore,

Any statements…which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from owners who have no right to them…. [A]ll branches of pagan learning contain not only false and superstitious fantasies and burdensome studies…, but also studies for liberated minds which are more appropriate to the service of the truth.5

Augustine believed that “A person who is a good and a true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his Lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature.”6 Put another way, all truth is God’s truth. As Peter Leithart notes in his book on classical literature, the wealth of the wicked is stored up for the righteous (Prov. 13:22).7

Therefore, in a day when it is fashionable both to elevate STEM fields8 over the liberal arts and to disdain mythology as worthless paganism, Christians must be intentional about preserving the rich heritage we have in mythology. A particularly useful touchstone for Christian mythology is Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-Stories,” which appeared in 1947 in a collection published by Oxford University Press. This essay puts forth Tolkien’s vision for what fairy-stories9 are and what benefits they can bring to readers. Before moving on to a contemporary “myth-smith,” I want to focus on four major concepts that Tolkien explains towards the end of his essay: sub-creation, recovery, escape, and eucatastrophe.

**Sub-creation**

Before C.S. Lewis’s conversion to Christianity, he viewed myths as being worthless lies, despite their being “breathed through silver.” To persuade him otherwise, Tolkien wrote a poem titled “Mythopoeia,” in which he mentions the defaced image of God in man. Tolkien writes about the original mandate for man to exercise dominion over creation. Man is a “Sub-creator, the refracted light/through whom is splintered from a single White/to many hues… . /We make still by the law in which we’re made.”10

In other words, since we bear God’s image, though imperfectly, we create because God creates. We imitate and glorify the ultimate Creator as we engage in sub-creation. Tolkien puts it more clearly in “On Fairy-Stories” when he writes about creating fantasy: “[W]e make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”11 Of course, Lewis eventually came to agree with Tolkien, and they both used mythology to create their own myths.

**Recovery**

Lewis and Tolkien believed that their creative storytelling helped familiar ideas appear in a new light. As many of us brought up in the Christian tradition can attest, there is a regrettable familiarity and desensitizing that comes from constant contact with Christianity. As much as we might deny it, the gospel’s power over us wanes at times, through our constant exposure to it. Unfortunately, amazing grace is not so amazing the millionth time we hear it, not because we have fallen away as apostates but simply because it is the hapless condition of human beings: We need constant refreshing and reminding that we are the recipients of a truly amazing inheritance.12 Meeting weekly as a body of believers is one way to remind ourselves of the riches we have in Christ, but repetition does not always do the trick.

According to Tolkien, we need to see things, not merely in *addition* (i.e., week after week) but from a new *position*. Tolkien firmly believed that the creation and reading of fairy-stories could awaken us to the wonder of reality. Tolkien describes this new sense of wonder as a “regaining of
a clear view…. We need…to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness.” Tolkien continues:

This triteness is really the penalty of “appropriation”: the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things that we have appropriated, legally or mentally. We say we know them. They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and [in] acquiring ceased to look at them.13

Recovery is a concept Tolkien borrowed from G.K. Chesterton (who himself had picked up the idea from Charles Dickens). One dim and cloudy day, Dickens saw the word mooreeffoc on the window of a door. It was a door he had passed many times, but he couldn’t recall having seen that word there before. However, it took him only a split second to realize that he was viewing the word “coffeeroom” from the other side of the pane.

This startling experience caused Dickens to stop and examine the door, something he would have had no cause to do otherwise. Just as we often do in church, with a ho-hum attitude, we tend to look right past the “ordinary” things of life, from the miracle of our beating hearts to the fact that a god once walked among us. To use Tolkien’s wording, mooreeffoc “was used by Chesterton to denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle.”14

Mythology is a form of reification—making something abstract more concrete or real. It can provide a kind of template reset that is necessary to see life afresh with a childlike wonder.18 Tolkien says that “we need recovery,” and “a taste for [fairy-stories] may make us, or keep us, childish.”19 Mythology can help us recover our amazement of grace when we see it again for the first time.20

Escape

Recovery implies an escape from a state of dispossession, but the kind of escape that Tolkien proposed was not an anti-Christian escapism in which boy-men avoid real-life responsibilities by continuing to live in their parents’ homes and playing World of Warcraft, or the kind in which wives spice up their mundane lives by reading the “mommy porn” of Fifty Shades of Grey. Tolkien’s escape was
not an escape from reality but rather an escape to reality. Related to his concept of recovery, escape is made possible by recognizing our dullness to the wonder of the world. An innocent prisoner should want to escape his drab, lifeless cell. Tolkien writes, “Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison,...he thinks and talks about other topics than jailors and prison-walls?”

One way that Tolkien believed that people became imprisoned was through modern advances. Tolkien hated industrialization, a major cause of factories’ overtaking the beautiful countryside. He even refused to ride in a car. Tolkien’s suspicion of machines is made obvious in Saruman’s Isengard, the epitome of industry, where forests are destroyed and horrific creatures are mined out of the earth. (Of course, it is possible, and even necessary, to view industry and mechanics in a more positive light. Even technology is part of God’s creation, so there must be a sanctified way of using it for God’s glory.)

Yet, if we are honest, we recognize that the desire for escape is strong within us. In Romans 8:19-23, Paul specifically speaks of the deliverance from the curse of sin that all creation longs for. Tolkien calls our yearning to avoid death the “Great Escape”—the oldest and deepest desire. Tolkien writes that this theme of escaping death inspired George MacDonald, a Christian writer of fairy tales. It is no stretch to say that fairy tales, myths, legends, etc. provide this sense of escape better than most other genres.

But our escape is not a reviling of this world. We escape the horrors of this world, not by fleeing from it but by setting it right. As C.S. Lewis puts it, “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.” God pronounced His creation to be very good. A healthy escape is not an escape from the goodness of this world but from the perversion that has plagued it since the Fall. We can be optimistic about Christ’s kingly rule over the world, and this optimism leads me to Tolkien’s final point in his essay: eucatastrophe.

Eucatastrophe
According to Tolkien, good fairy stories do not ignore the fact that terrible things happen in the world, but these stories are optimistic in that they give a “fleeting glimpse of Joy...beyond the walls of the world.” Whereas catastrophe is literally a downward turn, eucatastrophe is an upward turn, and “when the ‘turn’ comes, [it gives readers] a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality.” Furthermore, through fairy stories “we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through.”

Tolkien even went so far as to describe the Gospels as “a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories...‘mythical’ in [its] perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels in the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe.” But we should not stop with merely appreciating the magical and joyful nature of the gospel. We can create our own stories to reflect the truth about the world and give people a fleeting glimpse of joy. Tolkien writes,

Writing mythology can be the calling of a Christian, and the best fairy tales and myths point us to the true Myth, as Lewis described it—the joyful story of a God-man dying in the place of undeserving sinners to make them inheritors of His Father’s kingdom.

Embrace
As the title of this paper suggests, I believe that Christians should embrace popular culture’s fascination with mythology. However, a true embrace is more than passive acceptance. It is a surrounding, an encircling of something. Christians, as guardians of the true Myth, should be leaders in myth creation, not followers—proactive, not reactive. Far
from evading or blindly imbibing the influx of today’s mythological fare, Christians should be active in producing their own feast of fables.31

I have already mentioned some of the Christian literary giants of our recent past, but on the contemporary scene, one Christian who is excelling in the sub-creation of myths is Young Adult author N.D. Wilson, a best-selling author of young adult fiction with Random House. Christians have lots of practice complaining about fiction they don’t like, but here is a Christian who at least is lighting a candle in the fiction world rather than simply cursing the darkness.

The son of a Presbyterian pastor and author, and the graduate of a classical Christian school and college, Wilson has been marinating in Protestant poetics his entire life. Far from discouraging him from using mythology, his religious background has been a primary influence in encouraging him to create new myths, as each of his YA novels is deeply rooted in mythology.

**Leepike Ridge**

His first major novel, *Leepike Ridge*, is a work of literary fiction, and the opening sentence itself is a nod to fairy tales: “In the history of the world there have been lots of onces and lots of times, and every time has had a once upon it.”32 There are connections to *Tom Sawyer* and *Robinson Crusoe*, but the strongest connection—that which provides a loose framework for the story—is mythological. Chapter 1 leads the narrative with a young protagonist, Tom, who has lost his father and who is angry that suitors (one of whom is named Leiodes) are beginning to vie for his mother’s hand in marriage. When Tom goes on a watery quest to find his father, his mother is left to defend herself against the greedy suitors, and she relies on the wisdom of a neighbor named Nestor. Other characters have names acknowledging the classical source on which *Leepike Ridge* is based, including “Lotus,” “Argus,” “Sirens,” “Cy[cl]ops,” “Medon,” “Dolius,” and “Ulysses.” Tom is swept away by a current that flows underground into a cavernous world, and after many adventures (spoiler alert), he emerges above ground in a chapter titled “Easter.” His emergence occurs in a place none other than from underneath the great four-post bed that his father had made, and Tom is able to save his mother from the suitors in a climactic showdown.

The obvious ties to Homer’s Odyssey provide not only an engaging time-tested structure of adventure but also a source of amusement and appreciation for older readers who will catch many of the parallels. Wilson defends his copious use of Homer’s material in a statement on his blog:

> Stealing ideas from contemporaries is rude and tasteless. Stealing from the long dead is considered literary and admirable. The same is true of grave-robbing. Loot your local cemetery and find yourself mired in social awkwardness. But unearth the tomb of an ancient king and you can feel free to pop off his toe rings. You’ll probably end up on a book tour, or bagging an honorary degree or two.33

**100 Cupboards series**

Wilson’s *100 Cupboards* series is tied less to classical mythology than to fantasy and folktale lore. Wilson claims that significant influences on these three books are Spenser’s unfinished epic, *The Faerie Queene*, the Scottish mythology of Robert Kirk; and the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott. There are more obvious ties too. In the first book of the series (which his wife has affectionately nicknamed *100 Places to Put Your Plates*), the setting of a small town in Kansas from which a hero is whisked away is redolent of L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful
Furthermore, the fact that the magic portals are cupboards points to at least two sources in popular children's literature: the wardrobe in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and the magic cupboard in Lynne Reid Banks well-known series. The undying witch is, of course, another clear debt to Lewis.

The second and third books in the trilogy—*Dandelion Fire* and *The Chestnut King*—continue the journey through mythic realms, including worlds of alternate history and the very Scottish references to “second sight.” Regarding bibli cal imagery, which comes across in a very mythic way, Wilson at one point describes an arrow that is “fletched with the feathers of a desert seraph, pointed with a tablet shard brushed by God’s own breath, and shafted on the core of great Moishe’s rod, first found and flown on the ancient field of Ramoth Gilead, killer of kings.”

These books have sold well. *Leepike Ridge* has sold roughly one hundred thousand copies, and the *100 Cupboards* trilogy surpassed the five hundred thousand mark in 2011. Wilson’s current project, a proposed five-book series (*Ashtown Burials*), is his most ambitious yet, and even though his previous books have been successful, the first book of this current series has received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, and *Booklist*. *Booklist* specifically acknowledged Wilson’s copious “allusions to mythology.”

*Ashtown Burials* series

The mythological structure of the *Ashtown* books is not as easily discernable as *Leepike Ridge*. *The Dragon’s Tooth* is loosely patterned after Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, but mythological allusions are amply strewn, breadcrumbs-like, throughout the stories. We could think of it as mythological and historical bricolage. (Think of Wilson as a mythological bricoleur, or tinker.) The main characters in the first book, *The Dragon’s Tooth*, are teenager siblings named Cyrus and Antigone Smith, and they must ascend the ranks of a secret order to do battle with an evil character named Mr. Phoenix. In the middle of the novel, one character tells the Smith children about the Dragon’s Tooth, which Cyrus secretly has in his possession, although he does not fully know what it is:

“When Man was first tilling ground and tending gardens, before he thought to wall his cities, Draco the Devourer came down from his stars. He hated Man for his body and soul, joined together in one creature, and he meant to rip the two apart forever—Man would be mere flesh, or mere soul, but never both. Old Draco fashioned himself a monstrous scaly body and a set of charmed teeth with edges to them that could slice a soul’s hair sideways.

“But things just didn’t go as planned—they never do for dragons. Raging, Draco spread his wings and dropped through the sky’s floor. Cities burned, and everywhere he went, souls withered, sliced and uprooted from their flesh. But one boy picked up a stone, and while men fled screaming, he threw it into the demon’s mouth and knocked out just one tooth as long as the boy’s own arm. He picked it up by the root, and with it, he slew the dragon body. Draco retreated into the stars, but he left behind that tooth.”

*The Drowned Vault*, book two in the *Ashtown* series (with new characters such as Arachne, Ponce de León, Dracula, and Gilgamesh with his army of transmortals), was released in bookstores in March 2013, and the third installment, *Empire of Bones*, is scheduled to be released in September 2013.

Time constraints prohibit me from addressing the fiction of other contemporary fantasy authors who are Christians, including Brian Godawa, L.B. Graham, Jeffrey Overstreet, Andrew Peterson, and others. But it is encouraging that instead of admiring the work of the past, contemporary writers are venturing out to model God’s creative act through their fiction, and specifically through mythological narratives. Traditionally, mythology may have been largely in the hands of pagans, but this kind
of storytelling is our “myth-right,” stolen, as it were, from the pagan Esau. This regaining possession is not epitomized by the B-grade copycat kitsch that has colonized today’s Christian bookstores. In the Creation-Fall-Redemption schema, Redemption is a rightful reclaiming of what is ours since Creation. What the Fall stole, we must steal back. This theft is not an individualistic, Promethean defiance in the face of the gods. It isn’t really even the deceptive supplanting by a Jacob. It is our birthright and privilege as co-heirs with the Son of God to join with Him in destroying the works of the dragon and making disciples of the pagan nations.

* * *

In October 2012, I had the privilege of interviewing N.D. Wilson about Christians and mythology. That interview can be found at: http://themundanemuse.blogspot.com/2012/10/nd-wilson-and-mythology.html

Endnotes
2. She wasn’t.
3. Although towards the end of this article I do get into mythological elements in some contemporary fiction, I am focusing more on recovering lost ground than on breaking new ground.
4. E.g., a t-shirt with a picture of the blue Twitter Bird and the clause, “Follow Jesus.”
6. Ibid., 47.
8. Science, technology, engineering, mathematics.
9. In this article I am using mythology broadly enough to include fantasy, fairy tales, etc.
10. Lines 61-63, 70.
12. I presented this paper at Dordt College on a Saturday (Nov. 3, 2012), a couple of days after Pete Rollins had spoken at the opening plenary presentation on Thursday. With respect to Pete, who said that if we have to do something over and over again, it must not be working, I believe that God has made us to need constant renewal—we do the same thing over and over again, not because it isn’t working but because it’s always in the process of working.
14. Ibid., 77-78.
15. Ibid., 77.
16. Ibid. Similarly, G.K. Chesterton writes in Orthodoxy: “[Fairy] tales say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green. They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water” (New York: Random House, 2001; 51).
18. N.D. Wilson’s non-fiction book Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl is an attempt to help Christians recover a childlike “wide-eyed wonder in God’s spoken world.”
21. “On Fairy-Stories,” 79. Again, contra Pete Rollins, who said that there is no difference between “real life” and the fake things we do to escape life (e.g., go to Disneyworld): Certain lifestyles twist our creational telos/purpose—we were made for more. C.S. Lewis said in his sermon “The Weight of Glory” that “we are far too easily pleased”—making mud pies in the city instead of taking a vacation at the beach.
22. Tolkien eventually orchestrates the demise of this tower at the hands—or should I say, branches—of the trees themselves.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 87.
28. Ibid., 88.
29. Ibid., 89.
31. See Brian Godawa’s book Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002) for more on this idea of evading vs. imbibing (cultural anorexia vs. cultural gluttony). See especially Ch. 1 on “Stories and Mythology.”
36. This is evident from events such as the opening crisis at a hotel, a parallel to the black spot episode with blind Pew, eavesdropping from an apple barrel, and a reference to the fact that dead men tell no tales. Moreover, several key characters are named William Skelton (Billy Bones), who dies early in the story, and a legless cook named Big Ben Sterling (mirroring Long John Silver).
37. I am using *bricolage* in my own way here, not in the way Claude Lévi-Strauss uses it in connection with mythology in *The Savage Mind*.
38. Big Ben Sterling.
40. Brian Godawa: “The Bible’s own appropriation of pagan imagery—such as the many-headed leviathan, or the divine ruling Rephaim of Sheol—illustrates a mythopoeic interaction with surrounding culture that is a common feature of subversive storytelling. One retells the prevailing stories through one’s own paradigm…. It is not pure fantasy—it’s in the Bible—but I’m bringing it to light through the fantasy genre of storytelling” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XU1PNaa25FQ).
Hugh Cook's novel *Heron Lake* depicts a community in small town Ontario, Canada, through the lives of individuals whose circles touch only at the edges, ultimately leading to the central character's reconsideration of her roots in the church. Written through a frequently changing third-person-limited point of view of five central characters, *Heron Lake* reads best without too much time between readings in order to stay acquainted with the characters' places in the narrative line.

Madeline Harbottle is a local school teacher, the independent-minded single mother of two adult sons, one who is mentally incapacitated because of a near drowning at an early age and the other, more stable, older brother now absent. Divorced early, bearing the guilt of neglect in the past and the burden of her family's continuing struggles in the present, Madeline has chosen to rely on no one but herself. Multiple sclerosis, which began several years back, leaves Madeline increasingly at the mercy of a body that will not bend to her will and the threat of what may happen in her future. As she watches her rest-home-relegated father, whose dementia leaves her unrecognizable to him, she does not wallow in self-pity but goes on, on her own, bolstered by the memory of her father's once strong will. But the circles of the other lives touch hers.

Cook's narrative skill is evident as he captures the character of each of the central figures. Voice ranges from the narration and dialogue of Madeline's son Adam, whose observations are given in simple, choppy sentences—"He stood watching the pigeons. They have very sharp eyes. I should probably go, he finally says"—to that of the crude and vulgar character of Orrin—"Stealing cars and banging girls were both easy for him 'cause cars were a piece of cake to hotwire once you knew how and with girls all you had to know was how to talk nice to them." Through the unique voices of these essential characters, Cook enables the reader to be privy to their thinking, knowing the plot before the town does because of the intersection of the individuals involved, leaving the reader with the question of how all this will come together rather than the question of what will happen next.

The story lets the circles of these authentically depicted characters touch, some in the past and some in the present, but all with some level of influence on Madeline. For those familiar with Cook's other work and his background, we pick up on a few details of how a faith community works quietly in the life of a woman who pushed her father's church far from her but can no longer handle life on her own: a visit here, a friendship club there, ready attention during catastrophe. We accept that those are enough for her to rethink her life's journey and God's grace throughout. For those unfamiliar with such a world, her sudden realization of God's grace may seem somewhat surprising.


I hate running. I would have never, ever considered reading *Born to Run* if a friend hadn't so strongly recommended it and, to be honest, if I hadn't been out of other books to read. So, with a sigh, I picked up *Born to Run*. It has a nice-enough cover: a very fit man silhouetted on a mountaintop. Unfortunately, I opened the cover, which quickly led to hiding from my children so that I could keep reading.

In *Born to Run*, MacDougall searches to relieve his running-related pain. Given that shoe companies, sports science, and the medical profession warn that running is "an inherently dangerous sport" (155), the only solution they offered was to wear ever-more-expensive, cushioned running shoes or to quit running altogether. MacDougall's search for alternatives grows into a rich re-discovery of the human spirit and body—and the wisdom of crazy people.

MacDougall, a perceptive writer who frequently contributes to *Men's Health* and *Runner's World*, seeks running-related information from all kinds of sources. Soon he focuses not on fast runners (where the bulk of the science is directed) but on those who run well over very, very long distances. There are those who run 100-mile trail races—nearly four marathons—such as the Leadville Trail 100: "Try running the Boston Marathon two times in a row with a sock stuffed in your mouth and then hike to the top of Pike's Peak. Done? Great. Now do it all again, this time with your eyes closed" (60). The Badwater Ultramarathon through Death Valley boasts a ground temperature of 200 degrees that melts runners' shoes unless they stick to the white line painted at the road's edge. MacDougall follows...
African Bushmen who use “persistence hunting” to catch fleet prey, not by speed but by running it to exhaustion. Finally, MacDougall tracks down a legendary American runner, nicknamed Caballo, living among the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico’s remote Copper Canyons. Members of this tribe regularly play running games of 60 or more miles in 100+ degree heat, powered only by chia beans (think chia pets).

None of these sources are credible by professional running standards. No self-respecting running coach would attend the Leadville race, “that giant outdoor insane asylum in the Rockies,” because ultra-marathons are viewed by real runners as “somewhere between competitive eating and recreational S&M” (77). Some of the Tarahumara had participated in a few Leadville races, further widening the gap between professional and crazy. MacDougall reports that at one Leadville competition, the Tarahumara team captain “looked like a Keebler elf, [. . .] a short fifty-five-year-old grandfather in a blue robe with flashy pink flowers, topped off by a happy-go-lucky grin, a pink scarf, and a wool cap” (64). Further, the Indians eschewed running shoes but “disappeared into the town dump, emerging with strips of tire rubber that they began fashioning into sandals” (64). As a research psychologist, I was initially wary of MacDougall’s non-scientific sources, but I was captivated by the characters and hints of a “stick it to the man” attitude. Rather than reading like a litany of anecdotes, MacDougall’s book skillfully frames his quest for ways to run without pain inside his befriending of Caballo.

Engrossed in the personalities and anecdotes, I was slow to realize that Born to Run is more than a story of gifted (if quirky) endurance runners. MacDougall skillfully works at a deeper level to show us the world he has long sought, where running is joyful instead of painful. His thesis? Being human means being born to run—designed, even, to run over very long distances rather than to run fast. Further, endurance running requires being a lover of life. As a non-runner, I was skeptical; as a Christian psychologist longing for a holistic view of personhood not of life. As a non-runner, I was skeptical; as a Christian psychologist longing for a holistic view of personhood not of life. As a Christian, I was willing to listen. To support his thesis, MacDougall weaves three lines of argument throughout his narrative. And, unknown to him, he reveals some of the creational norms that have been hidden under so much technology, individualism, and other cultural baggage.

First, he includes insights of those deeply involved in distance running but willing to look beyond corporate sports’ research for ways to improve. Dr. Joe Vigil, an elite coach, attended a Leadville race to learn what he could about technique and motivation: how people run a ridiculously long and difficult race that doesn’t come with fame or prizes (All participants—winners and losers—merely receive a belt buckle). The Tarahumara were competing, and Vigil was astonished by what he saw. Rather than individuals forcing themselves to take each painful, exhausting step, the Tarahumara ran together with shared joy and laughter throughout the grueling race. Vigil, forced to re-think his ideas about endurance running, gradually concluded that human endurance may come less from technique and willpower and more from a capacity to love: “It wasn’t just how to run; it was how to live, the essence of who we are as a species and what we’re meant to be” (99). MacDougall gains similar insights from American ultra-runner Scott Jurek, unbeaten in endurance races until he ran against the Tarahumara. Jurek reflected that the Indians’ purpose in running and racing is “to be with each other, [. . .] adding power to the pack” (253). What a reformed Christian understands as our innately communal nature was good news for these professionals: we gain invaluable and immeasurable strength, encouragement, correction, and motivation through our relationships with others.

MacDougall’s second line of support for his thesis comes from recent findings in morphology, a branch of biology that studies the structures of human and animal bodies. Again, some researchers asked questions outside the academy’s current paradigms and identified several features that appear to uniquely suit humans for endurance running (e.g., ability to breathe independently of our stride). MacDougall uses these findings to argue rather convincingly that humans are designed to run, that running is not just about speed or just for a gifted few. Although he comes to his conclusions through an evolutionary argument, the scientific findings are intriguing and drive Christian readers to wonder at a Creator who attends to the smallest details in knitting us together.

Finally, MacDougall argues that Western culture, technology, and economic interests have stunted our created nature as distance runners (not that MacDougall would say “created”). Rather than being progressivist (“what’s newer is better”) or pessimistic (“the old ways were better”), Born to Run refreshingly allies a primitive Mexican tribe and American ultra-runners to challenge current views of running and of being human. Both groups seem crazy, but their successes belie the medical and corporate research that serves giant sportswear companies: “Traditional podiatric thinking still saw human feet as Nature’s Mistake, a work in progress that could always be improved by a little scalpel-sculpting and orthotic reshaping” (177). As the Tarahumara have long known, and as more ultra-runners are discovering, running barefoot protects one’s knees, back, and body; shoes cause injury by blunting the signals feet receive from the ground and therefore prevent the body from making needed adjustments. These primitive people may know something about our created structure that Western cultural development has distorted. These strange peoples know great joy in running together, with small steps, to reflect their humanity.

MacDougall’s writing illuminates and entertains. His playful style has a strong intellectual appeal that engages even couch-loving readers. His style evokes Michael Sims’

Perhaps the most difficult question arising from Jim Heynen’s new novel, *The Fall of Alice K*, is the nature of “the fall” Alice K prompts or experiences. The title suggests that the plot will nosedive into something sad or tragic, and the ingredients are here—a bright but naïve high school girl and an ambitious young man, her lover, with a slightly checkered past, an outsider. Throw in two pairs of “tribal” parents (Dutch Reformed and Hmong) who oppose whatever it is their two children “fall” into, and we’ve got what might be another *Romeo and Juliet*.

Not really. Nickson, the eldest son of a Hmong family who have just moved into Dutch Center (a town which is exactly that), is no Romeo, save, perhaps, in his considerate love-making. But Heynen is cautious, even foreboding, in his descriptions of Nickson, suggesting his difficult past in St. Paul—some run-ins with the law, some issues with drugs.

Alice Krayenbraak, on the other hand, is Juliet in wooden shoes. Like dozens of young Dutch-American women, she’s tall and blonde, smart as a tulip, and quite regal in her bearing, even though her kingdom is her parents’ hog farm just a few sad months from foreclosure. She’s drop-dead gorgeous, she is blessed with angelic skin, and she falls. That’s true. For Nickson, at least. Of that fall there is no question. Nickson reciprocates in actions, but Heynen never suggests that he is as deeply taken by Alice as she is by him, all of which makes us wonder not only about the genre of the novel, but also a bit about Alice’s motivation—why does Alice K fall?

*The Fall of Alice K* is a love story, but when passions untangle, the novel begins to feel more like a coming-of-age story, in part because Heynen is far more interested in family dynamics among both the Hmong and the Dutch Calvinists than in Alice and Nickson’s teenage passions. In fact, the issues in the Krayenbraak family go a long way toward explaining why Alice K, a bright and engaged student in her final high school year, falls so utterly for a guy she barely knows, a very short young man whose eyes, whether he likes it or not, are right there at the level of her breasts.

Alice’s father is stoic and dour, the quintessential Dutch Calvinist farmer, a man whose love for his daughter is expressed obliquely in the pitch he uses to remind her to do chores. But then, Farmer Krayenbraak has good reason to be so serious. He’s about to lose his farm, his livelihood, his life—to become little more than an hourly employee to some local agri-business man, right there on the very ground he worked his whole life. Meanwhile, Alice’s seemingly paranoid mother is hunkering down for Y2K, the end of the world somehow imminent. For much of the novel, she’s downright scary. Alice’s only sibling, a sister named Aldah, “the canary that went down into the deep well of her family’s misery,” is mentally disabled but fully capable of resourcing the love her sister needs so badly to both give and receive.

Color all of this in the ominous shades of darkness that Calvinism traditionally lays over its adherents in almost any novel (save Marilynne Robinson’s), and there is likely good reason for Alice’s seeking love with Nickson, in hay mow and open fields. He is almost everything her family is not. And that’s a “fall”?

But it’s Nickson’s family who is more troubled by their relationship than her parents are, and it’s his uncles who drag him back to St. Paul to protect him from what they undoubtedly believe is Alice K’s siren song of seduction into American culture and away from his own kind.

Alice’s “fall” would be emotionally liberating if the torrid affair rather predictably triumphed over the self-righteousness of her hopelessly Calvinist parents, a scenario most readers would expect. But love doesn’t conquer all, and, oddly enough, by the end of the novel, Alice K appears to have learned something valuable about being a *dweller*, someone who lives comfortably in the world, and not just a *seeker*, one who doesn’t, terms outlined in the preacher’s sermon at the novel’s outset and woven into the story throughout.

And there’s much more to the novel. Heynen wanted to get everything he could into this book, maybe in the way Calvin got just about everything anybody knew into the *Institutes*. As a result, the novel is a love story, a coming-of-age story, and a whole lot more.

Jim Heynen is a writer with an authentic rural past, a man who remembers, as if it were yesterday, the magic of light brought to farmsteads when rural electrification...
came in the late ‘40s. Few American writers today have his agricultural pedigree; few know or remember what it’s like to clean a hog house or sit in the cavernous glory of an empty haymow. Heynen knows the farm and loves it; and it may well be that the most memorable parts of the novel are Alice K’s reveries in the barn and on the farm. That her parents’ operation is going belly-up is not a joy to her but a horror. She loves the farm as greatly as she loves the Ford 150 she drives all over the country. Really, she is not dying to get away, and her redemption may be in her staying.

The Fall of Alice K is a farm novel, one of very, very, very few anymore, in a culture in which the number of people who work the land decreases significantly every harvest. It is clear that Heynen wanted this novel of his to be exactly that. He takes great glory in close and sometimes rhapsodic descriptions of farm life, occasionally at the expense of narrative drive.

And there’s more. Some of us with Dutch blood find the novel a compendium of Dutch-Calvinist life in the rural Midwest, complete with a full recitation of the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism. The novel is a GPS, an annotated map, of Heynen’s homeland. The truth is, I could show you exactly where Alice K’s farm stands, just off Highway 75, where he says it is. Anyone with any background in what the novelist Frederick Manfred called “Siouxland” could too (by the way, Manfred, another Dutch Calvinist novelist, is in the novel). Dutch Center is Sioux Center; Midwest Christian High School, under a slightly different name, isn’t far away from the desk where I’m typing right now. Redemption College is really the place I taught literature and writing for the last 37 years.

In fact, I’m in this novel as James Schaapsma, an inclusion which perhaps should have barred me from writing this review. It’s a cameo appearance I’m proud of, a quick reference to a prof who has no role in the story but teaches at Redemption College and writes short fiction. A ton of such brazen wooden-shoe reference and prototypes exists. Alice K’s angelic English teacher at Midwest Christian is Miss Den Harmsel, a gracious reference to Dr. Henrietta Ten Harmsel, who was likely one of Heynen’s own teachers when he was a high school student at Midwest Christian—make that Western Christian.

Those familiar references make someone like me, a Dutch Calvinist from the neighborhood where Heynen grew up, smirk and smile at Heynen’s cleverness all the way through, an aspect of the novel most readers, I’m sure, are not likely to share. And here’s something else perhaps only a Dutch Calvinist would perceive: the novel’s unique and even sometimes blurry vision.

What does a writer like Jim Heynen owe to his past, to his tribe, to his people? It’s fair to say that he hasn’t always thought the world of his world, his tribe—I could quote chapter and text. But The Fall of Alice K is more fully about respect than it is about love, even when respect is hard to give because love is so blessedly hard to find. Alice’s mother is a strange bird, as we say out here in Siouxland, but threaded throughout the novel are references to her thoughtful character and intelligence, references that Alice hears but finds impossible to believe.

By the end, however, Alice’s father’s deep and unwavering stoicism, as well as her mother’s paranoia, is somehow blessed, offering Alice K a place to stand, a place to dwell, in the preacher’s terms. Alice’s fall—her impetuous and angry, even, at times, arrogant behavior—is righted by her acceptance of what Lewis Smedes used to call her parents’ “mystery,” her acceptance of what she doesn’t know about them.

This Dutch Calvinist likes to read the love story as a real coming-of-age story, the “fall” as a fortunate one, the novel itself as a treaty of peace between a writer and his people, because what’s there at the end of the novel, quite grudgingly, is still a good, good thing—respect, which is, in a way, yet another word for love.

All the loving asides—the love of the farm, the respect he grants his people—sometimes diminish the dramatic movement of the plot; but then Heynen’s new novel is a story to get lost in.

The Fall of Alice K?—Jim Heynen’s new novel?—I liked it.

Then again, Dutch Calvinist that I am, I should.


“How can I trust ____?” Many people echo the concern that modern America is a society marked by a crisis of trust. How can we trust a government so slow to respond to the needs of victims of Hurricane Katrina, an economy rocked by the collapse of a credit default swap scheme, churches plagued by abuse scandal. The list goes on, and it is these sorts of questions that led Martin Marty, professor emeritus from the University of Chicago and renowned religious history scholar, to write this book. The remedy, as Dr. Marty puts it, is building “cultures of trust” at every level of social experience, from the home to the statehouse, and it was this proposed remedy that drew me to the book. However, expecting a “how to” guide, I was disappointed to find more of a prolegomena to such an endeavor; nevertheless, this book, though a sometimes flawed meditation on trust, is shot through with gems of wisdom and arresting elucidations of profound truth.

As more of a scholarly set of “first things” than an
instruction manual, the book gives Marty's best insights in laying out a framework for understanding the nature of trust. We tend to think of trust in terms of whether we dare place our "trust in" someone or something. Sometimes we speak of a politician or institution having the "trust of" the people. Marty begins his approach from a more elemental level. For him, trust is both an attitude and an object, a feeling we express and something that can be fostered or built up. Trust is a forward-looking concern that enables risk-taking in the face of uncertainty, but it is a fragile thing built up. Marty points to religion as one of the key trust-building aspects of culture; in fact, he cites many philosophers who see this as the prime purpose of religion. Rather than trust in individuals, Marty says that religion, which in the scope of his book means Christianity, fosters a "biblical" trust, that is, trust which inspires boldness and which is grounded in the experience of a community rather than simply in individual action.

This religious example, then, is just one of many initial contacts which Marty describes as the upward development of trust from the individual experience to the broadly shared experience of society, punctuated at various levels by specific interactions of trust and risk. Marty states that an individual learns first to trust himself or herself, then the "immediate others" on whom the individual, particularly as a child, depends. From this point, trust is further developed and reinforced through small groupings of individuals linked by interdependence and shared values, the "building blocks of society." Marty argues that it is these building blocks that must be emphasized and strengthened to best develop the large-scale culture of trust that he seeks.

Yet what about building trust in a society where subcultures have little shared history or where trust has badly eroded? For this, Dr. Marty looks to a variety of enlightenment and classical sources, particularly focusing on the enterprise of forming the United States, a process commonly held to have been a grand unified effort but which more recent scholarship has shown to have been made up of rather disparate interests. Success in America was, according to Marty, a result of individual willingness to acquiesce for the good of a common enterprise, a first step in creating a common story that could then be used to unify the nation. And it is in common enterprise that institutions can begin to function as the "building blocks" of society.

As small subcultural and societal groups become larger and more complex, it is impossible to build trust in the interpersonal way it is first learned; instead, institutions take on a meaning, an expressed purpose, which transcends the individual such that, say, physicists or members of a certain religious denomination could meet other laborers in their field or member of their association and instantly have a basis of trust upon which to build a relationship. Eventually, these institutions come to represent mass constituencies based on shared goals, serving as repositories of transferred individual trust, and this is why Marty focuses on these "building blocks" as the important focus for building trust. They are the engines, the mitochondria converting interpersonal relationship-based trust relationships into common enterprise and a community-based trust. Then, through dialogue with each other, these institutions work together in building society.

So where does this leave us? Should this book be adopted by reading groups and used in classrooms to teach about trust? Despite all of the wonderful insight I gathered from this book, I would answer, "No." Marty's writing style tends to meander, and he often wanders afield before coming back to add further nuance to the topic. It is not a book which progresses systematically through a topic. It is the sort of book which must be swallowed whole and carefully digested before the best bits really start to come together. On my first reading, I took the book in smaller pieces, and I found that it was nearly impossible to really follow Marty's argument. On a second reading, I compressed my study down to a few days of more intensive study, and then I was treated to many more insights and connections than those that presented themselves in my first pass. This approach leads me to believe that the book is best suited for something like a graduate seminar, where deep reading on a compressed schedule is the norm. I would recommend the book more strongly to a person who has that sort of time for the endeavor.

Beyond a matter of taste in writing and argumentation style, I take issue with Dr. Marty's book in one other aspect. Throughout the book, Dr. Marty uses the debate between religion and science as a test case for his ideas about building cultures of trust, particularly in how these two groups come together in the public square. The debate pops up in smaller bits, but eventually Marty makes it apparent that he does not believe that conservative Protestants have a place at the table for fruitful dialogue because they have repeatedly rejected the "well-founded theory of evolution." My problem is not so much that I disagree with Dr. Marty; my training is in legal, not scientific, fields. My problem is with the nature of the argument that Marty seems to accept in reaching this conclusion. Marty makes much of philosopher Michael Oakeshott's "modes of thinking" (something like worldview). In Oakeshott's view (as
explained by Marty) conversation breaks down when one mode of thinking makes a “category mistake” and tries to speak authoritatively about another mode. Marty seems to buy the argument that while religion and science may be complementary in terms of developing a more fully-orbed understanding of the world, they are radically divorced ways of seeing and understanding the world, ways that seem to hold dominion in separate worlds from each other. That is, religion is a practical mode of thinking which has little to do with the quantitative measure of the universe that science develops.

The problem with this view is that it also divorces religion from history, another mode of thinking more related to science in Oakeshott’s philosophy. While Marty isn’t ready to cede to science’s denial of a virgin birth, he does dismiss ideas of something like a six-day creation as a form of category mistake. That is, when science, which is good at explaining processes, speaks to origins, religion, which is good at explaining purposes, should be silent. This is similar to the mistake of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the liberal theologian who jettisoned the historical nature of the Christian faith in his efforts to reconcile the debate between faith and reason. The Bible is certainly not a textbook, but it is a covenant document based on a historical relation between God and His people, anchored in the declaration of a historical resurrection. It is one thing to resolve the Genesis debate by appealing to reasons why the text may not be literal, but the debate is between both science and Scripture speaking to history. By Marty’s own line of thought, it seems to me to be a category mistake to presume that science lays the only valid claim to the issue. I applaud much of what Marty lays as a groundwork for fostering conversation between science and religion, but I see no reason for excluding assumptions about origins from that conversation.

Overall, then, this is a book woven through with a consideration of the nature of trust which sparkles with brilliance and insight, although it is hampered at times by a meandering focus and some problematic assumptions. This book is decidedly not a “how to” manual on building cultures of trust, but, as a book which equips readers with a toolset to go about that task on their own, this book is a vital and valuable resource.
Pro Rege

Pro Rege is a quarterly publication of the faculty of Dordt College. As its name indicates (a Latin phrase meaning “for the King”), the purpose of this journal is to proclaim Christ’s kingship over the sphere of education and scholarship. By exploring topics relevant to Reformed Christian education, it seeks to inform the Christian community regarding Dordt’s continuing response to its educational task.

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