

## Statement on Civility, Compassion, and the Way of Jesus

GCU is a missional, Christian university that invites students from all walks of life, Christian and non-Christian alike, to seek truth and to find purpose within a context marked by civility and compassion. We welcome all within the community to engage in respectful and charitable dialogue at all points, especially in matters of faith and conscience.

This statement regarding civility and compassion is offered with a dual purpose. First, for the sake of the university, the statement aims to more closely connect life and doctrine on campus. As a Christian institution, Grand Canyon University's (GCU's) identity and mission are deeply rooted in "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). The essential tenets of this faith are summarized in GCU's Doctrinal and Ethical Positions Statements which provide a shared foundation for doctrinal and moral reasoning on campus. These documents articulate fundamental principles for the university community as it seeks to align with the teaching, character, and example of Jesus Christ.

Thus, the university recognizes that faithfully following Jesus entails more than merely articulating sound doctrine. Sound doctrine and clear moral vision are indispensable to Christian life and community. But authentic Christianity also requires careful attention to the ways that doctrine and ethics are expressed. As the Apostle Paul reminded a young leader in the early church, you must "watch your life *and* doctrine closely" (1 Timothy 4:16). One cannot be neglected without diminishing the other, for the faithful Christian must consistently embody the truths of the faith.

Second, for the sake of the larger societal context in which we live, this statement aims to clarify the ways that GCU lives out its Christian mission and identity. Those who have never visited the university or developed relationships with GCU's students, faculty, staff, or administrative leaders do not have direct knowledge of university's culture and ethos. As a result, the university's story is sometimes told in ways that are puzzling to those who make GCU the warm and vibrant community it has become. In an attempt to share the heart and soul of the university with outsiders, we offer this brief summary of the values, convictions, and commitments that shape our lived narrative as a university.

### ***Competing Narratives and Cultural Wars***

We live in an increasingly pluralistic world of competing ideologies, virtues, and narratives. Within the US this competition of worldviews seems to escalate with each election cycle, newscast, and Supreme Court decision. Culture wars have ensued along with increasing pressure to take sides. Once a side is chosen, loyalists to a particular party, group, cause, or identity are expected to embrace and defend their side by any means necessary. Too often these means include vilifying and dehumanizing those who choose an alternative party, group, cause, or identity. In response, those who are vilified and dehumanized are often eager to return the favor as if the cause of justice progresses with each heated exchange. The result is a devolving cultural war that, at best, will result in a bright future for the victors and a bleak future for everyone else.

We suggest that the way forward will require an alternative strategy, and perhaps one that sets aside the metaphor of war in order to secure a brighter future for all. In the face of similar warlike tendencies, a young teacher in the ancient world once set forth a vision we find compelling. Near the beginning of his ministry, Jesus subverted the dominant cultural narrative

by challenging those who vie for power and by sharing his alternative vision for humanity as a more excellent way. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). He said this with full awareness that most seek God’s blessing through power and the oppression of their enemies. To counter their destructive narrative Jesus began to tell a different story. He offered a new narrative that requires an active and intentional effort to make peace in a way that results in blessing for the entire community, not just those who find themselves in a position of power and advantage over others.

The biblical notion of peace, or *shalom*, is multifaceted and entails the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of what it means to be human. In modern verbiage, this sort of peace is often described in terms of human flourishing referring to a state of excellence in which people, as individuals and in community, experience and enjoy fulfillment, peace, abundance, and completion. Biblical flourishing involves thriving in all areas of life, encompassing the wellbeing of individuals and the communities in which people live. In order to attain peace of this sort we must be reconciled to others individually and communally. Ultimately, we must also be reconciled to God. Human flourishing, according to Jesus, requires proper social conditions but it also requires properly formed human agents who embrace and embody the modern virtues of authenticity and sincerity as well as the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.

GCU educates students in light of Jesus’ vision for peace and human flourishing. This occurs through civil and compassionate dialogue about the teaching of Jesus and a number of other perspectives about the world in which we live. At the same time, the university labors to shape lives as well as minds. Ideas matter but we believe that one must be capable of more than simply articulating ideas clearly. One must also live in a compelling way by embodying character and virtues that bless others and contribute to human flourishing. This emphasis, perhaps more than the ideas that we share, sets the tone for embracing God’s vision for peace and justice while shaping community values at GCU.

In many ways, the Christian community at large has fallen short in offering a compelling vision for flourishing due to a failure of character and virtue rather than a failure to propose persuasive ideas. We aim to address such shortcomings to the degree possible on GCU’s campus. Therefore, we intend to remain diligent in engaging in the broader cultural dialogue in meaningful ways by adjusting, not our ideas, but our focus and approach to Christian education. As a result, we offer the following principles in an effort to further civility and compassion within the university and beyond as we work to fully express the faith, hope, and love that should characterize individuals and communities devoted to the way of Jesus.

### ***The Way of Jesus***

Scripture describes Jesus as the living embodiment of the very nature and character of God (Colossians 1:15-20). Consequently, when we look to Jesus we catch a glimpse of the very heart of God. As a result, Jesus’ life, ministry, teaching, and dispositions represent the ideal expression of the Christian faith. Inadequacies within the church and in the behavior and attitudes of individuals are easy to spot given the clear and compelling example of Christ. When we discover inadequacies, shortcomings, and corruption within ourselves, we must learn to turn toward Jesus rather than away, trusting that he is good, gracious, and willing to forgive.

Just as the Bible portrays Jesus as the embodiment of God’s nature it also describes him as one through whom both grace and truth have come to us (John 1:17). Consequently, full

expression of the Christian worldview must be a matter of both grace *and* truth. Truth without grace can be harsh, judgmental, and unrelenting. This was the error of the Pharisees and a perennial temptation for religious communities. Jesus himself rejected the way of the Pharisees and taught his followers a more excellent way. Thus, truth and grace must work together in the Christian life in ways that are Christ-like and should be offered to others in equal measure.

Conversely, grace without truth becomes vacuous, unclear, and equivocal inadequately reflecting the character of Christ while offering no clear vision for human flourishing. A doctor who withholds news of cancer may help a patient avoid the negative emotions that accompany a terminal diagnosis. But her failure to speak truth would leave the patient in a poor position to address his physical condition and would do nothing to spare him from inevitable pain and suffering. Similarly, a professor who teaches false things or withholds her true convictions in an attempt to be viewed as a good person or politically correct compromises her students as they graduate and enter a chosen career field. Consequently, we must learn to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and to walk closely with our neighbors as they consider its implications.

### ***Human Value and Dignity***

According to the Christian worldview, human life may be understood as a great good and precious gift from God who specially created humanity in a way that uniquely reflects His image and likeness. As a Christian institution, GCU affirms that every human being is precious to God and should be treated with the dignity and respect appropriate to creatures who bear the image and likeness of the Creator. These principles shape the classroom culture and campus culture for the entire university.

The intrinsic value of human life should be fundamental to all human interactions and must profoundly shape the ways in which we relate to one another. Indeed, human value and dignity must be considered more fundamental than our impulses to protect our own interests and further our individualized visions for the world. Those with whom we interact should be treated as fully human and entirely worthy of respect regardless of the challenges, frustrations, and disagreements that often accompany the exchange of ideas.

The affirmation that all people are worthy of dignity and respect extends to those who do not embrace the Christian worldview as much as those who do. Loving our neighbors requires generous, indiscriminate kindness and compassion that does not end when disagreements arise. According to Christ, faithful followers are to love their neighbors proactively regardless of their response or perspective. Jesus, requires his followers to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44), which is to say that those who make themselves our enemies also merit civility and compassion. He reasoned that while it is natural to those who love us in return, God himself is merciful to all without exception, and Christians must do the same. We must love in the same way in order to truly align our attitudes and actions with God’s. For only by doing so can we affirm the intrinsic value and dignity of all human beings. It is our hope that others will offer us similar consideration as we act and speak according to our consciences even when our views are at odds with theirs.

The affirmation of human value and dignity in the midst of disagreement and discord challenged the cultural values of Jesus’ day and bears great potential for doing the same in our day. In essence, he taught his followers to forsake the vitriol, tribalism, and uncivil discourse of his day in order to embrace a radical way of life that should distinguish Christians and Christian community from all other ways of life.

## *A Missional Community*

We regard right doctrine and right practice as essential to Christian institution. As a result, GCU aims to have a positive and transformative influence within the community it serves. For these reasons, the university is committed to affirming doctrinal and moral truth in a loving and merciful way that helps rather than hurts, by building up rather than tearing down through harsh judgment and self-righteousness. Indeed, GCU's identity and purpose find expression within the context of a missional community.

A missional community is a community of people strategically united in carrying out a mission that centers on following Jesus Christ in word and in deed, and in sharing the love of Christ generously to all who participate in the life of the community. Missional communities differ from what may be called covenant communities in which all members of a school commit to affirming and practicing the same faith. While a covenantal approach may be appropriate for some colleges and universities, GCU has intentionally cultivated a missional community and a culture that is characterized by a welcoming spirit and loving service to all. By God's grace, this approach to Christian education has resulted in an incredibly diverse student body with respect to race, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, and socio-economic status. As a missional community, GCU welcomes students from all walks of life, some of whom may experience Christianity and the love of Christ for the first time at the university. Following Jesus in this way requires selflessness, sacrificial service and an ever-increasing love of the Lord and our neighbors.

While there are many ways to provide Christian higher education, GCU's missional model places the university in an ideal position to engage students from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives with the love of Christ. Accordingly, GCU prohibits unlawful discrimination, including any form of harassment and/or retaliation, on the basis of age, disability, national origin, race, color, religion, sex, pregnancy, veteran status or any other classification protected by applicable law, in its employment, admissions policies, educational programs or activities, while reserving its lawful rights where appropriate to take actions designed to ensure and promote the Christian principles that sustain its mission and heritage.

Indeed, we are committed to engaging in genuine dialogue and community with mature Christians, young Christians, non-Christians, and the broader society. Doing so will require paying careful attention to the ways that individuals think and feel as they engage Christian thought and the way of Jesus. Toward these ends, the following principles are set forth as Christ-like rules of engagement in dialogue and other forms of interaction that may occur on campus.

### *Regarding Humility and Service to Others*

Various biblical passages outline the kind of humility, self-sacrifice, and self-giving love that is required of the Christian community and of all individuals who claim the name of Christ. Authentic Christianity entails humility and service of the sort that forsakes selfish ambition, pride, and conceit in order to put others' needs before one's own (Philippians 2:1-11). Indeed, Jesus described himself as one who came to serve rather than to be served, and he gave his life sacrificially for the sake of others (Mark 10:45). Furthermore, he called his followers to adopt this sacrificial lifestyle in order to serve one another (Mark 10:35-44).

In fact, Jesus was regularly criticized by the religious leaders of his day for cultivating relationships with social outcasts, interacting compassionately with the disenfranchised, dining

with reprobates, and extending kindness to those society rejected. He did so in ways that gloriously displayed the heart of God in the midst of a world in desperate need of grace and truth. His incredible wisdom, and moral purity distinguished him other teachers in his day. His love, mercy, and compassion drew the vulnerable, the weak, the poor, and those alienated from society to him in ways that changed them forever. His ministry created a community of compassion and inclusion that should shape all Christian communities in our day. Thus, we must be courageous enough to value, love, respect, and embrace those who agree with us as well as those who do not, out of commitment to the way of Jesus.

Our combined efforts as a university represent a vital opportunity to glorify God by serving others in ways that promote human flourishing. We are certain that God is working to restore the broken lives and communities of this fallen world through the collective gifts, talents, skills and resources with which we have been blessed as a university. We are assured that our work within the world matters to God and our neighbors, and that we honor God by serving others in ways that contribute to a more just and prosperous society. Thus, we are resolved to carry out our work on campus and within the public arena with compassion, justice, and concern for the common good.

#### *Regarding Civil Discourse*

The Apostle James provided clear guidelines for discourse among Christians. We must be “quick to listen, slow to speak, [and] slow to anger” (James 1:19). Contemporary dialogue is all too frequently marked by precisely the opposite. We tend to be unwilling to listen, intent on asserting our views, and easily angered by views that challenge our own. Consequently, civil discourse has nearly disappeared in our day, which should deeply concern us. Our society will not prosper if we cannot talk openly and honestly about what we believe, why we believe it, and what that means for our communities. This is true for the Christian and the non-Christian alike. Thus, we hope to revive civil discourse by equipping students to engage others thoughtfully and charitably, even when they disagree. These are some of the reasons why students from all backgrounds can rest assured that they will be valued and respected during their time at GCU.

As a Christian university, GCU approaches education from a Christian perspective, but the university intentionally welcomes all students to join the conversation no matter where they are coming from or what they believe. Students are encouraged to be authentic, sincere, and honest about their beliefs as well as their doubts. Interactions between students and between students, faculty, and staff should never involve insensitive, derogatory, or demeaning speech or behavior. A university experience should involve open dialogue, critical thought, respectful interaction, and a passionate pursuit of truth. These things are vital to the development of self-knowledge and depth of character.

Students need not be concerned about attending the university if they do not identify as Christians or if they are unfamiliar with the Christian faith. We welcome all students whether they embrace the Christian worldview or not. Students are not required to personally embrace the Christian worldview upon admission or at any point during the course of their studies. They are free to do so, of course, but they are also free to embrace other views of the world. As a result, students are assessed on how well they perform in the classroom, not the particular worldview they hold or what they personally believe.

#### *Regarding Integration of the Christian Worldview*

The university strives to integrate faith at all academic levels through a strategy that centers on the concept of a worldview. A worldview may be described as the complex network of assumptions that shape thought and practice. By exploring various worldview commitments, students are able to reflect on the implications and practical value of major options available within the marketplace of ideas. Everyone has a worldview, and everything that people think, say, and do flows out of an overarching vision of the world. The fact that everyone has a worldview means that no one thinks, speaks, or acts in ways that are entirely neutral. Rather, everyone lives in ways that are committed to deeply held understandings and convictions that operate at the level of a worldview. The challenge, then, is to help student gain self-awareness, self-understanding, and a capacity for thoughtfully, graciously, and critically engaging others' views.

Students are introduced to the concept of worldview from the start of their programs of study. By learning to think from a worldview perspective, students learn to reflect carefully on the underlying assumptions, motives and, intentions that shape views of self, others, and the world. They are challenged to consider the practical implications of their personal perspectives and to refine understandings on the basis of investigation, reflection and dialogue. In this way, students learn to discern underlying assumptions, analyze ideas, and compassionately critique various perspectives within the larger cultural dialogue.

Additionally, students are introduced to the Christian worldview and encouraged to consider the needs and interests of others in addition to their own while embracing the Christian values of love and service as they prepare to enter the workforce. Christians believe that God grants common grace to Christians and non-Christians alike, a grace by which all truth and all that is excellent in our work may be considered good, regardless of an individual's beliefs.

#### *Regarding Matters of Conscience*

Faith is a matter of conscience that cannot and should not be forced upon anyone who is unwilling or resistant to embrace it for any reason. As a Christian university, we aim to be winsome and persuasive in our presentation and practice of the Christian worldview while renouncing all forms of coercion and compulsion. Faith, when genuine, is a voluntary response to the person and work of Jesus Christ. As a matter of loving others as we love ourselves, we are committed to respectful dialogue and charitable engagement in all matters, especially matters of faith and conscience.

We have no intention of unnaturally imposing theological and biblical studies on every topic in the curriculum. Rather, in accord with Christian values and convictions, GCU affirms the universality and objectivity of truth and considers the pursuit of knowledge a worthy and attainable goal. Thus, the university affirms that genuine knowledge may be derived from a wide variety of sources, including human reason and introspection, scientific investigation, and divine revelation. GCU strives to cultivate an academic environment in which students are empowered to seek truth wherever it may be found. As with all credible institutions of higher education, the university labors to teach students how to think rather than simply telling them what to think in the process of developing global citizens, critical thinkers, and responsible leaders.

#### *Regarding Human Flourishing*

Within Western culture, it has become difficult to discern a unified vision for life that consistently satisfies the basic human desire for purpose and satisfaction. The modern world has

enjoyed incredible material prosperity and technological advancement but seems to lack clarity about how to face the future. In spite of the many pleasures that prosperity affords, genuine happiness has proven elusive. Regrettably, it is not yet clear that this way of life can satisfy the deepest longings of those who actually have to live with it.

We believe that Jesus offers a compelling vision for human flourishing that addresses the deep desires and needs of the human soul. The God of the Bible calls us to act justly, to love mercy, and to live humbly before him all the days of our lives (Micah 6:8). This threefold directive outlines the commitments that are necessary to move toward flourishing individually and as a society. For our good and for the good of others we must be just, merciful, and humble in all that we say and do. We must be committed to moral uprightness and fairness toward others as well as grace and charity when others fall short of our expectations. In short, we must become just and merciful people if we hope to bring about the sort of transformation we long to see in our communities. In doing so we recognize that we often fall short of these ideals, so our efforts must be characterized by profound humility as we live our lives together in a broken and complex world.

As intelligent and moral creatures, humans bear significant responsibility for what they know and how they live in light of such knowledge. As a result, the pursuit of truth should be a means to the end of promoting human flourishing and the good of the communities in which we live. Similarly, we must carry out our work with excellence and integrity and serve others as if our service is unto the Lord. Our work on campus and within the community flows from a vibrant faith and concern to honor and emulate Jesus Christ in all we say and do. Our Christian convictions, Christ-focused curriculum, and service beyond the classroom provide a foundation that is the bedrock of our community and a shared basis for work together. This shared foundation simultaneously serves as a reminder of who we are and a statement about who we strive to be.

### *Conclusion*

GCU's mission and vision are grounded in the love demonstrated to humanity by Jesus Christ that compels us to respond by loving Him and loving others. As a university, we believe that the message of Jesus Christ bears profound implications, not only for individuals, but also for society and the ways that we as individuals live within it. Our convictions extend beyond the central ideas associated with the Christian worldview to the breadth of ways that those convictions are embodied within the life and activities of the university. In alignment with the way of Jesus, we strive to foster a culture that affirms the intrinsic value and dignity of every individual who participates in the life of the university.

GCU's mission and vision are sufficiently broad for the inclusion of those who personally embrace the Christian worldview as well as those who do not. Christ himself demonstrated profound concern for his followers as well as those who chose not to follow him. We do not anticipate changing the course of history as he did, but in a small way we strive to embody this vision for human flourishing and to serve as a positive and transforming presence as we carry out our unique mission.