

**MATURING SPIRITUALLY IN
A DIVERSE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY
Ephesians 4:1-3; 25-32**

Introduction:

- A. Periodically I am asked the question: “What keeps you awake at night?” I usually respond that it isn’t
- tight finances at MVNU – although we are always “pushing the envelope” for new programs, personnel and facilities.
 - And it isn’t the enrollment - even though we want and need to break through the 400 first-time freshmen barrier.

Rather, the gut-wrenching questions that drains me of energy by day and sleep at nights are these: Are students growing in their Christian faith while studying at MVNU; . . . are faculty and staff maturing in Christ-likeness as a result of working at this institution? When I cannot sleep at night, I am usually pondering the painfully conflicting and often irreconcilable expectations I feel from MVNU’s multiple constituencies:

* students	* alumni
* faculty	* pastors
* staff	* Board of Trustees
* parents	

- B. And in the midst of these painfully conflicting and often irreconcilable expectations, expressed through emails, letters, phone calls, and personal conversations, I ask myself the question, “Is it possible – really possible – to live in “unity and peace” at MVNU?”

The “unity and peace” that is referred to in Ephesians 4:3, “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Paul is speaking to Christians. He is talking about Christian living together in Christian community. His words are for us.

In the midst of our incredibly rich, yet potentially explosive diversity, is our vision of MVNU as “an academic community of faith shaping Christ-like leaders for lifelong service” a fantasy of our imagination, a delusion grandeur or a God inspired conviction for which we humbly, yet firmly stake our lives to the glory of God? I believe the MVNU vision statement is a God-inspired vision for this campus!

- C. This broad concern of living together as Christians in the midst of diversity and conflicting expectations has captured my attention since 1978 when I moved to Europe to teach at the European Nazarene College.
1. In that rather small theological institution, students came from the northern European countries of Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, and also from the southern countries of Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Very different cultures!
 2. I began rather soon to ask the question, “How can we live together as Christians in such a way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?”
- D. The pursuit of this question continued in Asia where I served with faculty and students from highly developed countries economically (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Australia, New

Zealand), and students and faculty from underdeveloped countries economically or Third World countries (India, Indonesia, Philippines).

- E. It did not take me long in 1989 at MVNU to discover the rich diversity, various theological traditions, levels of emotional and spiritual security, and the conflicting expectations associated with this campus.
1. And, soon, I began to ask the question again . . .
 2. “How can we live together on this campus in such a way that our relationships are redemptive, not destructive, and a witness to unbelievers, especially within our campus community, of the reconciling work of God in Christ?”
 - a. On the one hand, we ought to expect (even affirm) differences of opinions and ideas within a Christian community. After all, we strongly believe that every person is uniquely created in God’s image and gifted by His spirit. Remember, we are the graced, blessed, gifted children of God!
 1. MVNU is sponsored by the Church of the Nazarene, yet aggressively pursues students from other denominations – forty-four different denominations are represented on campus this year from thirty states and eight countries.
 2. And even if all of the students from the sponsoring denomination and the forty-plus other denominations are Christians, there are genuine differences about the meaning and lifestyle of our Christian faith.
 - b. Yet, on the other hand, not all students on campus profess faith in Jesus Christ.
 1. Some who have not grown up in the church, and for various reasons have rejected the claims of the gospel, rebelled or turned their back on Christianity.
 2. Still others are being exposed significantly to the Christian beliefs and lifestyles for the first time. Christian faith and local church involvement are really “new” for these students.
 - c. To complicate the issue even more, we are seeking to attract students from off our region of Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky, to bring international students to our campus; and to improve ways at recruiting and maintaining minority students.
 - d. Diversity important to MVNU. I have a task force on Diversity working on campus this semester to recommend to me ways to increase diversity on campus. I say this acknowledging some racist comments spoken this year to some of our minority students and their sense of isolation within this faith community. It seems such a contradiction to affirm our faith in the Creator God and at the same time belittle or put down individuals created in His image.
- F. Back to my question: In the midst of conflicting expectations, differences of opinion, conflict of ideas, degrees of maturity/immaturity, varieties of traditions, and the uniqueness of cultures and numerous expressions of subcultures on campus, is it possible – really possible - to live together in such a way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?

G. My answer is a resounding **YES!** I state my tenure at MVNU on this convictional affirmation. It is very definitely possible, if we reaffirm three fundamental convictions – convictions that will characterize us at our best and convict us at our worst.

I. We need to convictionally reaffirm, often, who we are as a Christian institution.

a. We are a Christian community of faith. - Never lose this vision of ourselves - “we are an academic community of faith.”

b. MVNU faculty and staff have heard me repeatedly speak of some of the implications of our identity as a Christian community of faith:

1. We believe that every student can make a difference for Christ, regardless of her/his vocational choice.

- Whether students are accepted into MVNU’s honors program or track for at-risk students;
- Regardless of the economic condition of their families, and
- not withstanding the urban or rural environment of their high school community,
- We believe, really believe, “One person can make a difference in this world. And we affirm to every students You are that person.”

2. We believe that every student should come to the point of viewing herself/himself as a world Christian with a global vision. “Red, yellow, black, white – all are precious in His sight.” The world the whole world is the arena of God’s activity. God’s love for us does not depend on the color of our skin or the nation of our birth!

3. And, we believe that every student, following graduation, can live a holy life to the glory and praise to God, regardless of where his or her vocational assignment takes her/him . . .

. . . to Mount Vernon or Manila;

. . . to Columbus or Calcutta;

. . . to Fredericktown or Frankfort.

What we are, we are becoming. This means that we must now cultivate and develop a lifestyle of praise, worship, gratitude, devotion, respect, spiritual formation and faithfulness.

4. These three critical differences are the distinctive differences of an MVNU education.

B. Again, “How can we live together as Christians in such a way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ? First of all, convictionally reaffirming, often, who we are. We are a Christian community of faith.

II. We need to convictionally reaffirm, often, why we exist as a Christian community.

A. We exist to nurture and shape the life of faith. Our vision of MVNU continues; we are an academic community of faith, “Shaping Christian servant leaders.” We exist to communicate and nurture the life of Christian faith in the context of a quality liberal arts education setting.

- B. I believe a Christian university is the church at work in higher education.
1. If this is true, then we should expect, and even desire, to see an increasing number of unbelievers on campus.
 2. Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."
 - Non-Christians in our institution provide an opportunity for Christian witness and proclamation of the Christian faith.
 - The Christian's alternative lifestyle to the unbeliever's lifestyle can be witnessed through example, testimonies, attitudes, chapel services, classroom experiences, or informal discussions.
 3. But the task is not only to communicate the faith; our responsibility is the nurture the life of faith in every student regardless of where they are on their spiritual journey.
 - Courses are taught from a Christian perspective;
 - Bible studies are formed for small groups to explore the Bible;
 - Contemporary issues are addressed in forums from a Christian perspective;
 - Chapel services are intended to inspire students to worship and instruct them in the faith.

To repeat: We need to convictionally reaffirm, often, who we are as a Christian community, and why we exist as a Christian community.

- III. We also need to convictionally reaffirm, often, how we are to live in a community of faith.
- A. We are to live as a Christ-like community maturing in faith. (Individually and collectively). We are an academic community of faith, shaping Christ-like leaders for life long service.
- B. Let us not forget that faith communities like MVNU are dynamic laboratories. Wherein we learn how to live together as the graced, blessed and gifted children of God. "A dynamic laboratory . . ."
- I am coming to see that our ministry to each other – faculty, staff and students in the context of a dynamic laboratory of learning how to live together as graced, blessed, gifted children of God. A dynamic laboratory . . . !
 - Therefore we must be characterized as a

* confessing	* praying	* discipling
* forgiving	* worshiping	* disciplining
* affirming	* supportive	

 and maturing community of faith.
- C. Remember the 7/8 to 1 ratio. Clinical psychologist, Sven Wahloos, in his book *Family Communication*, states, make your communication as realistic positive as possible. It's a guideline he says that the praise to criticism ratio should be kept at about 30-90% praise to 10-20% criticism.

Often the opposite is true of our interaction with others with the family of God. Sometimes being emotionally honest necessitates criticism of another in an appropriate manner. However, 80-90% praise is needed and empowering. Thank you. Appreciate you. You were helpful. You affirmed me. I am grateful for you. Our praise cannot be superficial. Look for the positive. You can find it!

- D. We are talking about a life long learning and growing process. What we must understand, individually and collectively, is that we are to live together as a Christ-like community maturing in our faith day-by-day, month-by-month, year-by-year.
- IV. So what? you may ask. How specifically do the three fundamental convictions relate to me practically and personally on this campus?
- A. What are the personal day-to-day implications for me --for you --for us?
- B. Ephesians 4:25-32 spells out very specific implications for living together in an academic community of faith:
1. We are members of “one body” (family) – whose head is Christ (4:25)
 - Be honest
 - Do not lie
 - Yet in the process of being honest and not lying, remember the person about whom you are speaking or writing. He/she is my brother or sister in Christ.
 2. Satan loves dissention within the body the Christian community (4:26-27)

“In your anger do not sin”

 - Stay focused on principles.
 - Don’t cross the line by attacking persons, persons like yourself, (for whom Christ died)
 - Satan laughs when Christians attack one another and create division within the body.
 - Conflict management absorbs much of my time. It is expected within this diverse community. But be careful in attacking motives and ascribing judgments to others. Stay focused on principles and policies.

In your anger do not sin.
 3. Watch your words (4:29)
 - Be up building.
 - Not downgrading.
 - In New Testament terms, dialogue is a sacrament.
 4. Practice forgiveness (often). Be kind and compassionate (4:31-32)
 - Don’t harbor malice or resentment.
 - You were forgiven when you didn’t deserve it!
- Result: a Christ-like lifestyle (5:1-2)
- The life to which we are called to live as Christians.

Let me ask you, in conclusion:

1. Are you stronger in your faith since coming to MVNU?
 - Why/why not? I want to hear your responses.
 - Are you praying for others and assisting them in their growth in faith?

- How can we as an institution change our ways to be both a strong academic institution and a strong faith community?
2. Is there someone – faculty, staff, student, parent or friend to whom you need to speak or write, regarding some un-Christ-like words spoken or deeds done to the individual?
 3. Yes, it is possible to “live in peace” shalom – completeness-wholeness, in a diverse Christian community. As we
 - Remember who we are as a Christian institution. We are a Christian community of faith.
 - Remember why we exist as a Christian community. We exist to nurture and shape the life of faith.
 - Remember how we are to live in a community of faith. We are to live as a Christian community maturing in faith.
 4. These convictions will characterize us at our best. They will convict us at our worst.
 5. God help us! We stand in need of your mercy, grace, forgiveness and wisdom. Amen

Closing Hymn

“The Servant Song”

*Brother, let me be your servant, Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.*

*We are pilgrims on a journey; We are brothers on the road.
We are here to help each other Walk the mile and bear the load.*

*I will hold the Christ-light for you In the nighttime of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you, Speak the peace you long to hear.*

*I will weep when you are weeping; When you laugh, I'll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow Till we've seen this journey thro'.*

*When we sing to God in heaven, We shall find such harmony,
Born of all we've known together Of Christ's love and agony.*