

Statement on Human Flourishing



ONE FOUNDATION GRAND CANYON UNIVERSITY

Nearly all that is said and done within the context of higher education stems from deeply held convictions about the nature and purpose of human beings. Consciously or unconsciously, colleges and universities articulate mission statements, develop curricula, assemble faculty, and educate students according to underlying convictions of what it means to be a human being and how humans should conduct their lives. The results of these efforts tend to reflect the adequacy or inadequacy of each institution's vision for human flourishing.

We believe that the Christian worldview offers the most compelling vision available by grounding its conception of humanity in the purposes and plans of God. This worldview situates humankind within a world masterfully designed by a good God who formed men and women with intentionality, endowing them with value, dignity, and significance. Despite our inability to live up to the ideals of the Christian worldview fully, God continues to work redemptively to renew and transform individuals through Jesus Christ. Transformed individuals, in turn, bear tremendous potential for transforming their communities as they work toward shared goals, serve one another, and contribute to the common good.

Within the biblical narrative, Jesus emerges as the only human who has ever lived life fully in alignment with the purpose and plans of God. Moreover, he calls all who are willing to follow him, patterning their own lives after his while teaching others to do the same. This alone, he taught, will lead to wisdom, peace, and a blessed life that may be described in terms of human flourishing. Accordingly, Grand Canyon University, encourages faculty, staff, and students to find their purpose in Christ and to follow him within the context of various academic disciplines and career paths. Moreover, we believe that God, in his wisdom, created humans with special purpose and potential that stems from our shared humanity. Thus, our shared humanity bears more potential for unity and common purpose than the many things that divide us. While it will not be possible to articulate a comprehensive vision for humanity, we offer this statement in order to outline the biblical vision for human flourishing and to provide insight into GCU's unique approach to Christian higher education.

Human Flourishing in Christian Perspective

Human flourishing refers to a state of excellence in which human beings, as individuals and in community, experience and enjoy fulfillment, peace, abundance, and completion. Flourishing entails thriving in all areas of life, encompassing the intellectual, moral, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person and the communities in which people live. As creatures made in the image of God, flourishing in the most profound sense entails communion with God the Father through faith in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. In a broken world, this means that we must be reconciled to others individually and communally. Ultimately, we must also be reconciled to God. Flourishing, according to Jesus, requires proper social conditions but it also requires properly formed human agents who embrace the purposes and plans of God. Regardless, for the Christian and the non-Christian alike, even a partial and imperfect realization of this vision contributes to the common good and advances flourishing for all.

As individuals and communities pursue the purposes Jesus commends, it becomes possible to experience the blessing of God and the transformation he offers in Christ. The instructions given to the first humans indicate that men and women are to cultivate the riches of creation and participate in the creative work of God. We are to do this by discovering and enjoying the vast potential that God has woven into the fabric of the universe, leveraging the unique gifts he has bestowed on each of us. As we explore and discover the potential of creation, we will uncover new opportunities to shape the world in ways that honor God and contribute to the flourishing of all.

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The Biblical Account of Human Nature and Purpose

The biblical story begins with an account of creation wherein God formed and filled the natural world, producing an environment replete with goodness, beauty, and life (Genesis 1–2). As the narrative reaches a climax, we learn that God created human beings, male and female, in his own image and likeness. Thus, the origin and nature of humans demonstrates the unique value and dignity of human creatures along with an unparalleled capacity to enjoy special relationship with the Creator.

According to the biblical account, God formed the first man from the dust of the ground in a way that established a vital connection between humanity and the world we inhabit. He also breathed life into the man suggesting they are not merely physical but also deeply spiritual beings—a body-soul complex—designed with a unique capacity for relationship with himself. Moreover, he directly formed the first woman from the man’s body and endowed her with equal value and dignity as a co-bearer of the divine image. In this way, God designed humans with complexity, creating them as male and female expressions of a single shared humanity.

As he created the first man and woman, the Lord spoke a blessing over them. This blessing offers a glimpse into the mystery of all that the invisible God had in mind when he made creatures who would visibly continue his work on the earth. He then instructed them to fill the earth with more image-bearers who would also participate in the work and responsibility of cultivating the abundance of the created world (Genesis 1:27–31; 2:15). By creating humanity in his own image, God also passed along the joy of his creative activity by endowing these creatures with a similar capacity for work.

From the biblical perspective, humans are unique among all God’s creatures in that God’s purpose for their lives includes a mandate to increase in number and to fill the earth. Moreover, we are to exercise dominion over the earth by developing, nurturing, and shaping its vast resources in ways that enable humans and the created order to thrive. The implications of humanity’s stewardship as image-bearers is immense. God created his world so that all creation can flourish under the care of human beings. The created order is not a zero-sum game in which only a few can prosper at the expense of others. The riches of creation are sufficient for all and serve as a continual reminder of God’s abundant provision for his creatures. Accordingly, by cultivating earthly resources we are able to provide for ourselves, our families, and our neighbors without fear of scarcity or any need to deprive others.

We are blessed to have these resources and responsible for stewarding them in ways that reflect the character of God and contribute to human flourishing. And we have done so in wonderfully diverse expressions of our various cultures, races, ethnicities, abilities, and affinities. Even a casual observer can see that human beings were endowed with incredible intellectual, social, and creative abilities that suggest we are rational beings (*homo sapiens*), creative beings (*homo faber*), political beings (*homo politicus*), economic beings (*homo economicus*), and so forth. In sum, humans are uniquely capable of relating to God and working within God’s world in ways that honor him and partially reflect his good and glorious nature. These capabilities stem directly from the unique nature of human creatures as created in God’s image. Our individual gifts and abilities do not enable us to excel at the same level in each of these areas but our combined capacity for cultural and societal development represents a remarkable testimony to God’s wisdom in creating human beings.

From the beginning, the Lord designed men and women with potential for immense good or evil along with a commensurate level of responsibility to one another and to the Creator himself. When we choose to love the Lord and our neighbors, we most fully reflect our Creator who is love (1 John 4:8, 16). At each point that we choose to be unkind and unloving we deviate from the purposes and plans of God. Thus, we are capable of either contributing to the good of others or of detracting from the common good and diminishing our own humanity.

Jesus himself summarized the purpose for which God made man with reference to the wonderful complexity of human creatures. When asked which of God’s commands is greatest, Jesus reminded his followers that their primary purpose is to love the Lord God with their entire being—heart, soul, strength, and mind. As complex and wonderfully diverse, psychosomatic creatures we are to respond in reverence to God through our unique volitional, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical capacities. Indeed, true flourishing depends on living in right relationship with God, which enables us to relate rightly to others. Thus, Jesus also reminded his followers of a vital secondary purpose; namely, to love our neighbors just as we love ourselves. Living at peace in community with one another as we enjoy the fullness of God’s goodness and glory together.

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A Renewed Vision for Human Flourishing

Early in the biblical narrative the divine vision for human creatures was thwarted by the rebellion of the first man and woman. They rejected the purpose of their Creator and forfeited the blessed existence he offers. Consequently, as human beings increased in number and began to fill the earth, their presence has yielded mixed results, leaving the divine vision for humanity largely unrealized. As a result, we have failed to further human flourishing at many points, falling short in fulfilling the purpose and plans of God.

Within the fallen world, every facet of human nature and every endeavor that should reflect the goodness of God is now corrupted. The fall of humanity into sin and rebellion resulted in broken relationship with God, but also extended to human relationships impacting the entire created order. The biblical story provides example after example of the resultant longing for reconciliation with God and restoration of good to all creation. The hope of reconciliation and restoration anticipates the ministry and work of Jesus whose life, ministry, death, and resurrection changed everything. Through Jesus Christ, God is making all things new.

Accordingly, as the remainder of the biblical story unfolds God graciously persists in reminding his creatures of his plans for them and the purpose with which he made them. This gracious response to human failure is most visible in the person of Jesus Christ who displayed the heart of God perfectly throughout his life and ministry. Jesus' teaching and life clarified his Heavenly Father's vision for flourishing even as he labored to redeem the brokenness of the human condition, ultimately sacrificing his own life to make redemption possible.

From the start of his earthly ministry, Jesus began to lead his followers back toward the Father and the blessings he promises to all who humbly trust him and obey his teaching. The journey began for Jesus' first followers with a simple call, "Follow me" (Matthew 4:19). The call is simple and straightforward. More literally translated he said, "come behind me," meaning follow in my steps, watching the way I live, and patterning your lives after my own. Men and women who had experienced firsthand the disappointment, disillusionment, and discontentment that results from life in a fallen world understood exactly what he was asking them to do. For them this simple call was so compelling that they left their former lives and occupations behind and, by faith, began to follow a humble carpenter from the backwaters of Galilee. Their lives were forever transformed as they came to understand the power of God to make all things new.

God's Guidance for Our Lives

The Lord places a similar call on each of our lives that requires a similar response. We are first called to follow, through faith and repentance, and then to obey within the context of our unique gifts, abilities, and opportunities to serve and care for others. Thus, all Christians are invited to join in the work of the church for the life of the world. We are to be a pure and transformative presence in our communities, offering hope in a fallen world just as bright light pushes back the surrounding darkness (Matthew 5:13-16). Like a city on a hill, the combined glow from our individual efforts will shine brightly to the glory of God in ways that cannot be ignored.

The church gathers, traditionally on Sunday, to worship, regroup, and remember the gifts and promises of God in Christ Jesus. But the church, as God's people, also serves in the workplaces, organizations, neighborhoods, and homes where believers carry out their lives Monday through Saturday. In this way the rhythm of the Christian life moves continually between hearing and reflecting on the gospel message to faithfully living and embodying the gospel within the community. In this way, the message of Christ can transform, not only individual lives, but also the broader society in which we live and work. The Lord Jesus instructed His followers to live as salt and light, or agents of positive transformation, which implies a call to live out our lives in ways that contribute to the common good.

We are convinced that this call extends to the workplace and that our respective vocations represent vital opportunities to glorify God by serving others in ways that promote human flourishing. It is our hope that graduates of GCU will carry the hope of the gospel into the areas in professional areas for which they are being educated and formed. They will serve as nurses, teachers, scientists, computer programmers, counselors, and managers within various vocational contexts. As they enter these fields, they must learn to follow Jesus as working professionals in professional environments. Those who enter the so-called secular fields must recognize that theirs is a calling every bit as sacred as that of professional ministers and missionaries. Success in these places of work also depends on trusting the Lord to provide all that is necessary for faithfulness and flourishing. For no matter what he calls us to do, those who choose to follow will find that the Lord still transforms lives.

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Finding Our Purpose in God's World

The notion of a purposeful calling that originates from someone other than oneself is at the very heart of vocation as conceived within the Christian tradition. Christians have long conceived of work in terms of a calling that has been placed on human beings by God himself. The word vocation in English derives from the Latin *vocare*, which means “to call.” As a result, the notion of calling is bound up in the term “vocation.”

If work is purposeful, creative activity by which people cultivate the world, then vocation adds another dimension to the concept of working. Vocation entails the notion that people should be doing certain things with their lives rather than others. While the term is sometimes used as a synonym for occupation, vocation within the Christian tradition entails a richer understanding of the purposes with which one works and performs various functions. As a result, from a Christian perspective, vocation may be defined as a strong impulse and inclination toward engaging in specific activities and particular kinds of work as a matter of individual purpose. By God's design, this individual purpose finds expression with a larger community of transformed individuals in much the same way that a healthy body consists of diverse parts, each functioning according to its God-given design and purpose.

Thinking of work in terms of vocation suggests that purpose and intentionality pervade the world and that individuals are part of a grand design. Finding one's place in this grand design, or one's vocation, has much to do with the notion of calling. Distinguishing between three general types of calling clarifies the ways that Christians should follow Christ in general and in connection with their individual gifts and abilities.

The first and most important type of calling is simply the invitation to follow Jesus. This may be referred to as a gospel call or a call to respond in faith to the person and promises of Christ. Christ has called all his followers to trust in him for the forgiveness of sin and to follow him humbly throughout their lives. Failure to respond in faith to the gospel call closes one off to the fullness of blessing and abundant life offered in Christ alone. Christians, however, have been called to yield all that they are to Jesus. Thus, they integrate their faith and work in the same way that they integrate faith and all other aspects of their lives. The gospel call, then, is foundational to other aspects of calling and provides the relational basis for deep personal renewal needed to respond appropriately to Jesus's summons.

A second type of calling relates to the broad ways in which Christ-followers are to respond to the needs of those around them and fulfill responsibilities that demonstrate love for neighbors. This general type of calling includes one's obligations to love family, friends, and enemies in the ways that Christ loves. One may have a deep sense of calling to be a father, mother, friend, or neighbor, for instance. The significance of this type of calling must not be overlooked since it encompasses much of what God requires of all human beings in general.

Nonetheless, while the second type of calling is important, a third type is more relevant to the mission and goals of a university. In alignment with the unique giftings and abilities of individuals, Christ places a specific and personal call on his followers that clarifies the specific ways in which individuals are to follow him. This kind of calling is often accompanied by supernatural provision by which God himself equips people with special capacities and gifts by which they can serve and edify others. These gifts and abilities enable them to function uniquely within the larger body of believers, or the church, in ways that honor the Lord and benefit others. Thus, in addition to the gospel call and a general sense of calling to Christian obedience, this type of calling serves to define a specific purpose or mission that may be conceived of in terms of a vocational calling.

People can only fully understand and fulfill their vocational calling as a result of responding in faith to Jesus' call to follow. Yet all are called to follow the Lord in some ways that are shared and in some ways that are unique to who they are as individuals, how God has made them personally, and the opportunities God places in their lives. Calling is multifaceted but may be described essentially as a divine summons that originates from God himself, rather than oneself, and draws one toward purposes and practices directed toward his glory and human good. All are called generally to love God and neighbors. Calling, as it relates to vocation, is more of a personalized purpose that clarifies the specific ways in which God guides individuals within the community of faith toward his purposes and plans.

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Living Our Purpose Together

GCU seeks to distinguish itself as a university by instilling a sense of vocational calling and purpose in our students, faculty and staff. All members of the university community are encouraged to find their purpose in Christ and to live out that purpose in ways that honor God and serve others. As members of the GCU community find their purpose in Christ, we strive to assist them in living out that purpose within the context of a chosen career path, whether that involves engineering, cyber security, healthcare, or another vocational pathway.

For the individual, the process of bringing the values of Christ to bear on one's work requires thoughtful reflection on the ways that the Christian faith can and should inform thought and action within various vocations. Understood appropriately, our work represents a vital opportunity to integrate Christian commitments, ethical principles, and vocation in ways that glorify God and benefit others. Therefore, gaining a clear sense of all that God has called us to do with our lives amounts to a vital opportunity to discover the wisdom of his creation in connection with our individual gifts and abilities as well as the opportunities he has placed before us.

The call of Christ extends to our respective vocations, which represent specific opportunities to glorify God by serving others. Jesus intends to be Lord of our homes, our communities, and even our work. As the Son of God, he offers God's vision for our vocations which will inevitably result in his glory and our good. Work should not occur in isolation from God or without reference to our Creator. Rather, work should be conceived of as an activity one does in cooperation with God as he continues to order and provide for his creation through the efforts of human creatures. As a result, work from a Christian perspective bears a value and dignity that surpasses secularized conceptions. If one ignores God's design, it is possible to account for the brokenness of work but impossible to adequately account for its vast potential. Brokenness must be considered in a fallen world, but God's purposes and plans will be realized and, therefore, should not be left out of the equation.

Discovery and the realization of God-given potential in the creation and among human creatures look somewhat different in the pursuit of various academic disciplines. Nonetheless, all disciplines bear tremendous potential for enriching human life and contributing to the goals of human flourishing. Regardless of the discipline, the Christian worldview provides a robust foundation for integrating knowledge in ways that are consistent with Christ's call to love God with one's entire being and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In other words, the integration of Christian values and convictions offers significant opportunities to tap the unrealized potential of the world. Indeed, by God's grace, even our most imperfect efforts can be redirected, refined, and renewed for his glory and our good. For with God, all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).

A Shared Foundation

Jesus calls us to follow, and in following we learn that his vision for our lives encompasses every aspect of our lives. As the Lord completed the message we now call the Sermon on the Mount, he offered one final clarifying illustration. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. (Matthew 7:24-25). By contrast, anyone who fails to heed his teaching but fails and put it into practice can expect destruction when the storms of life come (v.26). Jesus' point was simple. A life that is carefully constructed on the basis of a solid foundation will not be susceptible to changing circumstances and mounting adversity. Rather, it will be adequate to the challenges of life and sufficient for all who follow the Lord faithfully no matter what he calls them to do or where he leads them to serve.

GCU's One Foundation represents the university's commitment to carrying out its mission on the immovable bedrock of Jesus' vision for human flourishing. When we trust God's purpose for our lives and follow him by putting his teaching into practice, we learn through experience that he is trustworthy. May he be glorified in all our humble efforts and may we enjoy the many blessings he has promised to those who follow him daily.

*The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.*