

QUALITY AND SOUL: THE CHALLENGE
TO EXCELLENCE IN CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Chapel Service

May 1, 2002

Colossians 3:17, 23-24

Introduction:

Three months from today, August 1, 2002, Mount Vernon Nazarene College will become Mount Vernon Nazarene University. From inside and outside of our campus community the question has been asked, “What will change besides the name?”

It is true that some things will change. Stationery, signs, Admissions literature, wordmark, logo, seal, and probably some academic and administrative structures. In time, additional under graduate majors and graduate programs will be added. Enrollment will continue to grow.

The publication given to you when you entered the chapel today talks about some other changes, and answers the fundamental question of why the change to Mount Vernon Nazarene University. Please take the publication and read it by the weekend.

Motivating us as we work through this process is the passage of scripture in Colossians 3:17, 23-24.

“And whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ...And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to man...for you serve the Lord Christ.”

Because of this motivating imperative, I want to identify, today, some issues that will not change.

- We will not change in our passion for excellence in Christian higher education. Former U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield in one of his books asks, “Does your work show a marked degree of excellence? Are you committed to the proposition that Christian work should represent a quality or standard of performance that is superior to anything secular, that you will never be satisfied with mediocrity?” Hatfield concludes, “If you are in an educational institution that is your first responsibility – to perform to the highest degree of your intellectual ability. That excellent performance will become a witness to the Lord you serve. If it means that you go out one night less a week to an extra-curricular activity, it is better to do that and have people see that a Christian is a person of excellence, ability, and high standards.”

Hatfield is talking to students at an educational institution. He would appeal for the same passion for excellence from institutional leaders – administrators, staff, and faculty.

As an institution, our intense desire for excellence in the classrooms, offices, and residence facilities will continue to drive us. The pursuit of the integration of Christian faith and the disciplines of academic study is integral to who we are. We remain committed to being the very best academic institution possible.

Convictionally, we believe that we are an academic community of faith as we lead, study, and serve at MVNC. Again, we will not change in our passion for excellence in Christian education.

- Secondly, we will not change our vital and vibrant relationship with the sponsoring denomination of this institution.

Let me pause and speak to you forthrightly about the relationship between MVNC and the Church of the Nazarene. The Church of the Nazarene is a relatively young denomination, as denominations go. Founded in 1908 in Pilot Point, Texas, the Church of the Nazarene was formed by mergers of like-minded holiness groups from across the nation.

From its beginning, the Church of the Nazarene has placed a premium on education. Former dean Burtha Munrow of Eastern Nazarene College coined it best; “There is no conflict between the best in education and the best in Christian faith.”

Today the Church of the Nazarene has a presence in 138 countries around the world. Fifty-seven educational institutions worldwide are sponsored by the denomination, including eight liberal arts colleges/universities in the United States. The 560 local congregations of the denomination in the East Central region - the official region for Mount Vernon Nazarene College – covering the states of Ohio, West Virginia, and Eastern Kentucky give approximately two million dollars a year to MVNC. This money assists the school with our operating budget and scholarship assistance. Approximately fifty percent of the students in MVNC’s traditional undergraduate

program has some connection to the denomination. MVNC's relationship to our sponsoring denomination is vital and vibrant.

During the past four years, two books on faith-based schools have caught my attention. The first book is *The Dying of the Light*, an 885-page book by James Burtchaell that talks about the disengagement of colleges and universities have from their Christian churches.

The book explores the dynamics of 17 higher education institutions with church school relations to show how and why they have tended to wither over time. From Burtchaell's perspective as a historian, the state of church school relations is more ambivalent than might be expected. According to Burtchaell, until the nineteenth century it was conventional for colleges in the United States to be identified with a Christian church. He believes that most colleges and universities no longer have a serious, valued, and functioning relationship with their Christian sponsors of the past. In fact, the schools that had begun with passion and zeal ignited by a faith community did inevitably, over time, drift from that relationship so that today in these institutions there is little if any recognition of a church and college relationship. Quite a pessimistic book.

The second book to which I referred is *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and their Universities Keep Faith with their Religious Traditions*. I was so fascinated with this book that I gave copies of the book as Christmas presents to the MVNC Cabinet members and to numerous members of the MVNC Board.

The author of *Quality with Soul*, Robert Benne, analyzes six faith based higher education institutions. He identifies ingredients that enable these schools to maintain faith with the church body that brought them into existence. These ingredients are a Christian vision, ethos, and persons who bear that vision and ethos. Naturally I have attempted to "devour" this book!

If we at MVNC want to "keep the faith," and strengthen and extend the relationship with the church body that brought the school into existence, then careful attention must be given to securing faculty and staff who embrace our vision and understand our ethos.

The Christian vision about which Benne speaks must convey insights on the origin and destiny of the world, the nature of history, of human nature and its

predicament, of human salvation, of Christian faith and purity of heart, and service to others as a way of life.

The ethos is expressed in a wide variety of activities and practices at MVNC and may include chapel services, prayer before class sessions, expectations regarding lifestyle, a focus on Christian disciplines, the integration of faith and learning, a campus-wide commitment to missions and ministry, and concern for the spiritual formation of the entire campus community. The ethos of MVNC is embraced in our school motto: “To seek to learn is to seek to serve,” reflecting our desire to serve God by serving others.

It is vital that a critical mass of persons in the student body, the faculty, staff, and Administration, the Board of Trustees, etc., live out the ethos, share it, and become ethos-bearing persons.

Our vision statement,

“Mount Vernon Nazarene College:
An academic community of faith, shaping
Christ-like leaders for life long service,”

must be embedded in the ongoing life of the college.

Benne concludes that where there is a clear Christian vision, and persons who live out the institutional ethos, the relationship between the school and the denomination can remain vital and vibrant. Indeed, often the educational institution leads the denomination in spiritual enrichment and missionary fervor.

Again I say, we will not change our vibrant relationship with the sponsoring denomination of this college.

- Thirdly, we will not change in challenging students with the critical distinctives of an MVNC education. “What are these distinctives?” you may ask.

In the context of preparing students academically and professionally for careers and for graduate studies, we challenge students:

- 1) to believe they can make a difference in the world for the Kingdom of God, regardless of their vocational choices;
- 2) to view themselves as global Christians with a world mission, and

3) to live their lives to the glory of God following graduation, regardless of where their vocational choices or graduate studies take them.

These “critical distinctives,” I pray, will continue to characterize an MVNU education. This institution will not change in these fundamentals, even as we intensify our focus on *Quality and Soul!*

As I reflect upon our mission and vision statements, and as I work with faculty, staff, and students, I am encouraged that Mount Vernon Nazarene College continues to be one of those schools that embraces the Christian vision and is blessed by large numbers of persons who live in their daily lives the Christian ethos of this institution.

Our mission statement is clear:

1. We seek to provide a rigorous academic program that encourages scholarship, critical reflection, and problem solving...
2. We seek to promote a distinctively Christian lifestyle within the Wesleyan evangelical tradition...
3. We seek to offer a supportive environment that inspires students to achieve their highest potential spiritually, intellectually, socially, and physically, as they prepare for a career and for meaningful service to God and humankind.

For some, the changing of a name may imply the changing of an identity, to mark a break from the past, and to begin anew. However, at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, we will continue to build upon our blessed heritage and an ongoing commitment to our distinctives.

We strongly reaffirm, based on our guiding principles, our strategic agenda, and the organizational structures already in place, that “mission drift” will not occur at this institution in the near future or in years to come. In fact, we seek to strengthen the Christian distinctives of our curriculum and programs and equip the entire campus community for a lifestyle of ministry and mission as part of our strategic plan for the decade.

- Finally, we will not change regarding the values underlying the MVNU faith community.

We will emphasize even more strongly the values underlying our life together at MVNU. These values characterize us at our best and convict us at our worst.

We love God; therefore, we seek to express these foundational values:

- a worshipping community
- a Biblical faith
- a Christlike lifestyle
- a holiness ethic
- a global mission
- a creation vision
- a spirit-empowered devotion.

We respect others; therefore, we strive to practice these behaviors:

- a magnanimous spirit
- a servant mentality
- a trustworthy character
- a positive influence
- a courteous response
- a giving motivation
- an appreciative attitude.

We believe in personal responsibility; therefore, we set forth these expectations for students:

- an inquisitive mind
- a disciplined schedule
- a modest appearance
- a balanced diet
- a physical fitness commitment
- a reliable word
- a lifelong learning and growth perspective.

According to the author of *Quality with Soul*, the educational institution's vision, mission, and values, need to be inculcated into every student, staff, and especially the faculty. The author affirms the central and critical role of the religion department in

articulating and clarifying the Biblical and theological foundations of learning and living together. In fact, he believes that colleges and universities need to make opportunities available and attractive for faculty to take courses in theology.

We believe that becoming a university will compel us to articulate more clearly our mission, vision, values, and principles. We declare that a change of name does not signal a move from our holiness message nor does it suggest a change away from our commitment to being an outstanding person-centered teaching institution. *Quality and Soul*. A rigorous academic program provided in the context of a distinctively Christian community of faith. May it be so for Mount Vernon Nazarene University.

I close by returning to some remarks of former Senator Mark Hatfield. His words have implications for faculty, staff, and students at MVNU. He states,

“A great god is abroad in our land – the god of mediocrity, the god of the average. During my days on a college campus, both as a student, then later a professor and Dean of Students, I frequently would hear a student say, “Well, when you come right down to it, I can be happy with a ‘C.’ Invariably, my response was, ‘You have the capacity to do ‘A’ work and you are doing ‘C’ work. I have less respect for you than for the one who does ‘C’ work because that is the extent of his capacity.

Occasionally, the student would excuse himself by saying he was so busy in a Christian campus organization and too involved for the Lord and would have to settle for a ‘C’ that semester. To such a person I’d say his first responsibility was to utilize and mobilize all the resources, capacity, intellect, drive, and ambitions that God has given him and to use them in the fullest. In dedication to Christ, a commitment to your endeavor is primary.

Hatfield concludes, “No words, no speech making, no meetings or sessions - though they be religious - can substitute in the thinking of the unbeliever for a performance of mediocrity. He judges that you are merely using that as a crutch or an alibi rather than doing that to which you are educationally committed.” (*Conflict and Conscience*, 1971. Work Books, Waco, TX)

Each of us at MVNC - students, faculty, and staff - has a program or responsibility to execute. Let us do it in such a superb manner that people who encounter us in the days to come at Mount Vernon Nazarene University will never equate mediocrity with the things of Christ.

Quality and Soul. This is a challenge to excellence in Christian higher education. It is our mandate at MVNU.

Listen again to the text for today: Colossians 3:17 ff

“And whatever you do in work or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” (v. 17)

“And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. (v. 23-24)

“Father, we seek to be a grace-filled academic community of faith, shaping Christ-like leaders for life long service. Lord, may we fulfill our vocation at Mount Vernon Nazarene University with even more passion, energy, commitment, and dedication. Have mercy on us Lord. Hear our prayer.” Amen.