

Does Paying Tithing Make You a Voting Shareholder? Brigham Young University's Worldwide Board of Trustees

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THE IDEA FOR THIS ESSAY came from Lu Ann F. Snyder, a delightfully sardonic being who is secretary to the provost at Brigham Young University. When LDS church members call the provost's office wanting this or that, they sometimes remind Lu Ann that as tithe payers, they are paying her salary and she therefore had better hop to. Lu Ann says she would like to ask for a raise but is too politic for that.

Her comments brought to mind a glut of similar experiences I had during my thirteen years as director of Public Communications at BYU. I have seen church members flaunt their righteousness, their defender-of-the-faith vigilantism, their membership in the Republican party, their pioneer heritage, and their love of "the Brethren," among other things, to gain favor among or intimidate BYU administrators. Some act as if having a temple recommend makes them a member of a worldwide board of trustees. Often their exertions are textbook examples of Doctrine and Covenants 121:39: "as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, . . ."

While I did not always agree with their tactics, I understood their motives. BYU has become a large, impersonal, cumbersome, unresponsive bureaucracy that leaves even top administrators frustrated with the politics and red tape. It suffers from the same inwardly-focused, self-preservation intrigues that prevent virtually all large organizations from serving their constituents effectively. Add to this that BYU is expected to fill so many roles by so many people, and it becomes difficult for it to function as a university.

Consider the following:

—Tithe-paying parents pressure BYU to admit their children regardless of academic qualifications while other tithe payers want their money to fund a university that is ranked in the top ten of the *U.S. News & World Report* list of America's best colleges.

—Internally there are arguments over whether BYU should be teaching or research oriented.

—Some people want BYU to increase its graduation rate while others want it to be a happy hunting ground for marriage partners. Related to this, the education of women creates serious conflict in the minds of some church members, as will be illustrated later in this essay.

—Sports fans who learned Christian humility through decades of losses now want to expand the coliseum so they can better savor the blood of victory. They never could understand why the Word of Wisdom didn't kick in sooner. But BYU is winning now—never mind that some of the key victories are at the hands of athletes who are not Mormons. On the other hand, some members wonder why the church allows BYU to get caught up in the boob-tube sports obsession that has swept the nation.

—Some parents expect BYU to teach students how to cope with life's problems while others want it to be a safe haven where controversial topics are never discussed.

—Some constituents love BYU's dress and grooming standards because they make the student body look so wholesome while others argue that these have little to do with education and lead to hypocrisy and to a whited-sepulcher syndrome on campus.

—Politicians continually badger administrators for some type of public identification with BYU, be it through filming a campaign video on campus or speaking to a class and inviting the media, because such exposure implies endorsement by the church. Other politicians yell foul when this happens. Remaining politically neutral while trying to educate students about the realities of political give-and-take creates tensions.

—BYU is loved, hated, envied, scorned, defended, defamed, praised, and cursed by its various publics. To some it is a bastion of righteousness and perfection—"The Lord's University." To others it is a showcase sham, filled with holier-than-thou automatons. The former are not serious about its being a university. The latter do not take it seriously as a university. When forces tug and pull in every conceivable direction, when questioning is interpreted as doubt, when debate is seen as contention, and when inquisition-minded types are heeded, the business of educating suffers.

With all these forces from faculty, church leaders, sports fans, political groups, special interest factions, and students, life in leadership at BYU can become almost unbearable. Part of BYU's unresponsiveness is necessary because if an administrator tried to meet all the expectations and demands

made upon the university by its unofficial board of trustees, he or she would be destroyed in a fortnight.

I have great admiration for the late Martin B. Hickman who miraculously navigated BYU's political shoals for seventeen years as dean of the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences. With such disciplines as history, sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, and psychology, the college is the largest and most diverse of any on campus and is pregnant with career-destroying hazards. But Martin survived and thrived. Even more miraculous, he did it as a University of Utah graduate and as a Democrat.

One of Martin's keys to success was this: "In this business, ten percent of 'em love you, ten percent of 'em hate you, and the other eighty percent reserve judgment to see what the record is. In administration you've got to learn to live with the fact that some people are not going to like what you do, and it won't be on just one issue. They are not going to like your style, period. If you can't learn to live with that, there is no place for you in leadership."¹

I quote Martin's philosophy because it applies so well when dealing with those who make squeaky noises—noises which have little or nothing to do with being a university.

So what chance do individuals have who object to tight uniforms on football players or want *Catcher in the Rye* banned from literature courses because these things distract from the spirit? Not much if those people use tithing, church attendance, or personal revelation as a hammer.

It is amusing to hear several applicants for the same job each claim to be God's choice based on personal revelation. This is a no-win situation because no matter who is hired (usually it is none of the above), the losers complain that the department chair or the personnel department or the whole university has apostatized and is obviously out of touch with God.

When someone threatens to stop paying tithing if BYU does not ban certain movies from its International Cinema program, it is about as effective as telling the president of the United States you will stop paying taxes if he doesn't come to your birthday party. That is not to say BYU never responds to legitimate concerns, but with all the other forces at play, anyone who uses the threat of withholding tithing to effect change is not going to be taken very seriously.

In the spirit of caring, it is tempting to discuss with these people how much they should reduce their tithing if they want to withdraw support from BYU and yet preserve their place in the kingdom. I estimate they could eliminate BYU's share if they reduce their tithing by anywhere from \$3.50

1. *BYU Today*, June 1985, 23.

to as much as \$10 on every \$100, depending on how the church's gross tithing income is figured.²

Some do not mention tithing but threaten to withhold direct donations to BYU. Here is an example³: "We were so upset and angered by the sick article in the last *BYU Today* by socialist Richard Johnson that we refuse to support BYU until you show us that you have your heads screwed on straight. The article suggested the same stupid ideas presented by Satan in the pre-existence."⁴

This type of threat is often accompanied by a BYU donation form filled out with zeros or a check for \$10 or \$20 that has been voided and torn in half. In most cases the writer has never before donated to BYU.

One exception comes to mind—a donor to the Women's Research Institute who wrote to tell us she was withdrawing her support because BYU had fired an employee in another area. I realize that she was probably venting her frustration with BYU using the only avenue available to her. But it seems ironic that a women's program should be made to suffer for the firing of a male employee who had no connection to the Institute. Then, again, I suppose she saw BYU as a monolithic whole. Not so.

Not all attempts at manipulation revolve around tithing and donations. One intriguing tactic is the "I'm tellin' on you" letter, which is either sent to the BYU president with copies to one or more church leaders or to a church leader with copies to the BYU president, deans, offending faculty member, and editor of *The Daily Universe*. Faculty tend to be a paranoid lot and not always without reason, but over the years I have been pleased to find that "Tellin' on you" letters generally do not endanger them. Such letters addressed to church leaders were usually forwarded with little or no

2. BYU receives approximately two-thirds of its operating budget from the church. That amounts to an estimated \$150 million a year. The rest comes from tuition and other sources. According to *Arizona Republic* figures published in 1991, the church receives about \$4.3 billion in member tithes each year. Theoretically BYU's share would be about 3.5 percent of the total. If as some say the *Arizona Republic* figures are several times too high (see *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 8 Aug. 1991, B-1), BYU's share could range up to 10 percent of the total.

3. Since this and most other citations in this essay were written as private correspondence, names of authors and recipients have been deleted. Other than editing to remove identifying or extraneous material, the citations are quoted verbatim including grammatical errors, misspellings, and misuse of words.

4. The writer is referring to "Socioeconomic Inequality: The Haves and the Have-Nots," *BYU Today*, Sept. 1990, 47-58. Johnson argues "that if we are serious about contemplating the moral state of contemporary American society, we might gain valuable insight by broadening the measure of morality beyond the traditional sins (crime, sex, drugs, and violence) to include such variables as poverty, homelessness, and socioeconomic inequality" (49). The article generated a large number of responses both positive and negative.

comment to BYU for a response. The following is an example of a letter to the LDS First Presidency that was forwarded to the BYU president, asking only that whatever response was made, a copy be sent to the church:

For the last three issues of *BYU Today*, it seems that the main thrust of the voice of the professionals of the church (ENGLISH, Librarians, Teachers, as well as Counselors) have been advocating to read explicit materials so as to acquaint the people with vice without having to engage in it.

Is this a change in church policy? Our voice has been and is advocating the policies (attached) given by the prophets, and exemplified by Utah law.

If there has been a change, would you kindly let me know? We certainly do not want our voice to be a different voice than the law nor that of the prophets. (This does not mean, however, that we intend to agree with BYU professors who profess allegiance to the church and their voice differs from the prophets.)

P. S. . . . I have reports from women who say that are being persecuted immeasurably (in the BYU provo area) when they ask for these protections for their children and they say it comes from BYU. Thought you'd like to know.

The writer referred to several *BYU Today* articles including, "Discovering the World Through Books," by associate professor of English Elizabeth Wahlquist, who wrote:

One of the most useful things adults and adolescents can do is to read books that reflect life honestly and accurately, but in many of our homes and schools parents and teachers are sheltering young people from the books written for them because they deal too much with real life rather than the ideal. These are often the very books young people need the most. When they are overprotected from the world around them,⁵ they are not prepared to handle it when they eventually have to face it.

Wahlquist is still on the faculty. There are others like her. I wish there were more. What better place to deal with controversy than in a setting where a faculty member, grounded in the gospel, can help students sort through difficult questions. To blindly hype perfection while allowing no discussion of life's difficulties is naive, jingoistic, and a perversion of gospel principles.

Here is another example along the same vein. This one was sent to the BYU president with a copy to a general authority: "On page 8 . . . Dr. [Richard] Cracroft recommends the book *Breeding Leah and Other Stories* and suggests that if we liked *Nightsoil* we will also enjoy this book. I have not

5. *Ibid.*, Apr. 1984, 28.

read either book but I do have a review of *Nightsoil* which is enclosed. My question is this: Does BYU really want its students, faculty, and alumni to read these books?"⁶ The president's response is refreshing and most likely different from what many expect from BYU:

... I have not read either of the books referred to, and in light of other demands on my time, I am not likely to do so. I will assure you, however, that Dr. Cracroft is not only a valued faculty member, but also a solid member of the Church (he served as both a stake president and also a mission president) who thoroughly understands and supports the values that we attempt to develop among our students. I would suggest that you raise directly with him any questions that you might have.

Richard Cracroft is still on the faculty.

Here is an example of someone playing off the anti-communism stance of some church leaders. It is one of a number of complaints received in response to a *BYU Today* article by Russian professor Gary L. Browning titled "The Nuclear Knot in Diplomatic Ties."⁷ Copies of the letter were sent to the president of the church and a counselor.

... Dr. Browning calls our attention to a need for greater understanding of the Russian people.

(I realize *BYU TODAY* is an Alumni Association publication, however, Dr. Browning if a member of your faculty and therefore I assume teaching in accordance with Church principles.)

Although I certainly agree that we should bear no animosity toward the people of Russia, I do feel Dr. Browning treats too lightly the form of government in the Soviet Union.

Communism is a cruel, inhumane, atheistic dictatorship which holds its people hostage. Six trips to the USSR to be shown what the leaders want him to see, talk to those they want him to talk to, does not, in my mind, qualify Dr. Browning to make the statement he did concerning the desires of the Russian people. . . .

I believe the church membership and your students at the Y should read and re-read the [1936] statement of the brethren concerning the evils of communism.

Gary Browning is not teaching at BYU now. He is serving as church mission president in the former Soviet Union. He will be back.

Publicity about the accomplishments of women faculty and alumnae sometimes generates complaints. People write wondering why BYU en-

6. The writer is referencing the *Alumni Today* section of *ibid.*, Sept. 1991, 8.

7. *Ibid.*, May 1983, 3-6.

courages women to get an education when they are supposedly taught by ecclesiastical leaders that their only calling in life is to stay home and have children. The following two doctrinaire letters are examples.

The first is in reference to an article about the success of a professional musician who is the mother of seven children.⁸ A father wrote stating that his daughter also is a gifted musician who always wanted to follow a professional career but instead followed the counsel of her parents and church leaders to be a mother:

... She has done that cheerfully because she needed to be obedient to the brethren. . . .

She started to complain about her decision when the Church publications began to glorify the women who, some with families, had carved out great careers for themselves. One of these outstanding examples was when the Relief Society . . . made a big thing out of the career women in the Church. Many of them were mothers but the articles failed to explain how the children made out as "career orphans".

... my concern here is that we all, including the Church publications, ought to be marching to the same drummer and that drummer is the prophet. When it is said in General Conference that a mother's place is in the home I believe it and my children believe it. With that conviction it is hard for any of us to read an article in one of the official publications of the Church which glorifies a woman with great family responsibilities for building a career.

... I wish that the various official voices of the Church would not advertise that disobedience is good, great and rewarding. It leaves the obedient with grief, disappointment in self and a good deal of bitterness toward the Church for speaking with a forked tongue.

The second letter is similar. It is typical of what I call the "I've been good" approach.

I have been an active member of the Church all of my life. I pay a full tithing, teach the High Priest Group, been on a mission, married in the temple and try to follow the direction of the Prophet. Ever since I can remember the prophets have emphatically stated the most important calling of a woman is to be a mother and a wife and only under the most stressful financial conditions should she leave the home and work. . . .

During all these years I have repeatedly seen the Church News and the BYU Alumnus Magazine which I receive highlight in glowing terms the accomplishments of working mothers. Two stand out in my mind (I can't state the date) as being rather typical.

One was a major feature in the Church News about a mother who was a

8. *Ibid.*, 25.

judge in Salt Lake and whose husband was a doctor.⁹ Now that seems to stretch the guidelines set up by the prophet in every way I can imagine. . . .

The other was a shorter article about a woman in Rexburg, Idaho (her husband was a religion teacher at Ricks—I wonder what he taught his students about this) who was being honored for her accomplishments as a teacher and who was retraining to be a nurse.

. . . I have always taught them [his children] to follow the Prophet. What do I tell them when my oldest says in rebuttal that there are many, many professional women employed at BYU and that the Church publications are honoring working women who have young children and who are obviously not under financial stress and what's more many of these women have husbands who are employed by the Church, many who are teaching this religion I am talking about.

I hope you can help me because I am in a real bind. I really don't know how to explain what we see in relation to what we know to be the truth.

We had all better start reading that renegade *Church News* more carefully. It is truly a wonder how such articles got past correlation. In truth anyone who thinks that even an unwashed comma could get into the *Church News* hasn't a clue as to the workings of the church.

Let me shift now to the subject of organic evolution. Biblical literalists love to criticize BYU for any research that even hints at evolution—this in spite of statements by LDS church leaders to the effect that we do not have all the answers on this topic.¹⁰

Jack W. Sites, Jr., an associate professor of zoology, has documented chromosomal changes in the Mesquite lizard as it adapts to the environment of the high deserts in central Mexico. His research was featured in the June 1986 issue of *BYU Today*.¹¹ BYU received the following response to the article. Note the play on tithing.

My children graduated from BYU so I automatically receive BYU TODAY.

The June issue covers Research. At least two articles show that BYU as an institution supports the "theory" of evolution and millions of years for the earth's existence.

I am not only embarrassed but concerned almost to anger that our church university would support the activities and theories such as those

9. The writer is referring to an article by Justice Christine Durham in the *Church News*, 23 Dec. 1978.

10. See Duane Jeffery, "Seers, Savants, and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (Autumn/Winter 1973): 41-75; Jeffrey E. Keller, "Discussion Continued: The Sequel to the Roberts/Smith/Talmage Affair," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15 (Spring 1982): 79-98.

11. *BYU Today*, June 1986, 15-16.

of Dr. Jack W. Sites whose article appears on page 15. His work is funded in part by the church, meaning by the members' tithing.

How can an activity antagonistic to the gospel truth of reproduction *only* after its own kind, as well as the very clear teaching of our Latter Day Prophets including President Young who admonished Brother Maeser to teach nothing except by the spirit—be sanctioned by BYU.

... how are we church members supposed to resolve these problems?

After receiving this letter, the editor of *BYU Today* was told by the administration to be careful in responding because BYU pays a "terrific price" for such an article. He wrote:

As a university, we are committed to the pursuit of truth and understanding and believe that all truth that man may discover will ultimately be found to be compatible with the gospel. We do not support the traditional view of evolution (i.e., that man evolved from lower forms of life), although it does seem obvious that species of animals undergo changes and adaptations over periods of time. Furthermore, we do not presume to know exactly when each part of the earth was created from existing matter, which helps to explain various ambiguities relating to the age of the earth.

BYU wishes always to be found in support of the teachings of the Church, and I am sorry that you were offended by these articles.

This response from someone other than the president only fanned the flames, giving rise to another letter demanding a response from the president himself.

Subject: Teaching of Evolution at BYU

... what is BYU doing? If ... BYU is committed to the pursuit of truth, why is it trying to demonstrate as truth what revelation already states as false?

The earth was organized and formed the first day. In celestial or Kolob's time that is 1,000 years of our present reckoning. That puts it about 13,000 years ago. Not only that, mortality did not start on this earth until the transgression. So that brings us down to nearly 6,000 years ago. Where does that leave organic evolution of species? Doesn't it actually impress upon our belief the scriptural doctrine of reproduction after its own kind? ...

Truth is truth, whether simplistic and perhaps naive to "the world" or not. Why shouldn't Dr. Sites and BYU rather be using our church resources to *disprove* evolution?

In addition to this, the writer sent a letter to the president of the church:

Since I cannot understand, accept, nor resolve in my mind what BYU is

doing in this area, my Priesthood leader, not understanding it either, suggested I write to you. . . .

The articles most explicitly referred to are in *BYU TODAY*. . . . The First, at least, is funded in part by BYU's College of Biology and Agriculture and it's Monte L. Bean Life Science Museum. Members tithing may therefore be supporting this activity.

How can BYU conduct research to prove speciation through "evolution" when the scriptures and our Prophets and Apostles teach that these are erroneous philosophies of men?

President, I thoroughly support the inspired leadership of the Church by yourself and all general authorities.

Clearly, in some cases it is futile to respond.

About 200,000 copies of the June 1986 issue of *BYU Today* were distributed. There may have been other negative responses to the article on Sites's research, but the above complaints from one person are the only ones I remember. There was no public outcry against evolution, and Sites remained on the faculty along with archaeologists and paleontologists and others who to this day talk of things being millions of years old.

So why the caution about paying a "terrific price" for such an article? There are two reasons as I see it.

The first is that we as a people react negatively toward publicity about things that we think might create controversy. We are so defensive and so consumed with our own culture, so intent on preserving an image of perfection, that we do not realize the world as a whole, with all its consuming problems, cares little about our family squabbles.

The second pertains to politics at BYU and BYU's relationship to the LDS church. It may appear the university has it easier than public institutions of higher learning that answer to regents and legislators. BYU answers officially to a much smaller body—a thirteen-member board of trustees composed of top leaders of the church. But unofficially it answers to more. It is difficult for some administrators to turn down a request from a church leader even though that person is not a member of the board. It can get dicey when two different leaders expect something from BYU, and their views are diametrically opposed.

By extension some faculty members feel they possess ark-steadying authority over BYU by virtue of having contacts at church headquarters. Their obsequious, end-run whisperings in the ear of a general authority, even one not on the board of trustees, can make life miserable for a BYU president.

So if a president makes enemies because he allows "evolution" to be taught or an administrator is viewed as an anti-Christ because he advocates academic rigor, it is understandable there is concern if even one anti-evolution letter such as the above crosses an administrator's desk.

Most of the examples cited in this paper came from right-wing or orthodox types who seem intent on enforcing righteousness. The majority of influence peddling I experienced at the university came from these people, not from moderates who tend to live and let live.

I decided to go back to the files to see if I could find an example from moderates. The only one I discovered was from a group of Provo, Utah, residents whose homes border on BYU property. They protested by letter and in the media when BYU built an extension to a warehouse without considering the impact it had on traffic, parking, noise, lighting, and property values in their neighborhood. At first BYU defended this project, but after the residents banded together and placed a full-page advertisement in the *Daily Herald* (8 Apr. 1985), the university changed its stance and ultimately spent more than \$100,000 to address the residents' complaints. It also changed its policy to be more sensitive to community concerns. Notice the difference in the goals of the moderates versus the conservatives.

As mentioned at the outset of this essay, I have drawn on examples of influence peddling that I was personally acquainted with at BYU. This is hardly a scientific sampling, but my experience indicates that the self-righteous tend to be less secure and therefore more anxious to impose absolute standards on their fellow beings. In the case of BYU, they want it to be such an ideal example of perfection that if they had their way, thinking would be banned. It is safer that way. It also is the way Satan wanted it, that "One soul shall not be lost" (Moses 4:1).

On a personal note I confess that at one brief period in my life, I leaned toward a black-and-white philosophy. I have repented and hope I might be forgiven. It may seem strange to some that my experiences at BYU helped cure me of that malady, but seeing the workings of the system up close can do that to a person.

I hope the university can withstand the pressures of the pharisees and fanatics. But if it is to do so, the moderate voices on BYU's unofficial board of trustees need to become more vocal instead of leaving the debate to the reactionary fringe.