My Goal for La Sierra University

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June 22, 2011 13 Comments

By Sean Pitman

Transparency

Many, by now, have heard of the recent resignation of three faculty and one board trustee from La Sierra University (LSU) over the public release of a recording of a private conversation. On April 20th, a board trustee, Lenny Darnell, turned on the record function of his cell phone in a private town hall-style meeting attended by more than 100 select LSU faculty and staff and two representatives from the General Conference, Elders Dan Jackson, President of the North American Division, and Larry Blackmer, Education Director of the North American Division.

The purpose of the town hall meeting, apparently, was to address the two year struggle over the evolution controversy that has been raging at LSU. Reportedly, Darnell “wanted to be sure that he could recall all that transpired,” so he recorded the meeting. The next day Darnell sent copies of his recording to several people including at least one LSU faculty member and Spectrum Magazine. What prompted Darnell to pass on the recording of a private meeting? Perhaps he thought there was something said at the meeting that would favor the efforts of some to turn LSU into a “progressive” Adventist institution rather than have it end up as some kind of “Bible college”? However, no one, except Darnell, really knows. And Darnell isn’t talking.

Not surprisingly in this internet age, the recording ended up being posted online for a time before being suddenly pulled (It has since showed up on numerous “torrent” sites). During this time the recording made its way to the office of the North American Division. A transcript was made of the recording and subsequently passed on to Ricardo Graham, LSU Board Chairman.

Unaccountably, Darnell failed to turn off the recording function on his phone at the end of the town hall meeting. While his phone continued recording, Darnell drove to a friend’s house where he met up with Jeff Kaatz, LSU Vice President of Development, Jim Beach, LSU Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and Gary Bradley, LSU biology professor. While watching the Los Angeles Lakers play the Denver Nuggets in an NBA basketball playoff game, the four men discussed that day’s town hall meeting. While occasionally using some rather colorful language, they expressed less than flattering evaluations of church leaders (including Blackmer and Jackson), board members, and others.

According to a Spectrum article, “Ricardo Graham received the tape and the transcription from Blackmer on June 1. Graham contacted University President Randal Wisbev on Thursday. June 9. and requested meetings
with the three employees of the University on Friday, June 10, in Wisbey’s office. In separate meetings with each of the individuals, transcripts of the tape were shared. They were then given the option of signing a letter of resignation or having the material shared with the entire Board of Trustees. All signed letters of resignation.” However, only Dr. Bradley lost his teaching job and Mr. Darnell his position on the school board. The two other men lost their administrative positions but retain their tenured jobs at LSU.

Some who have listened to the private conversation have wondered why all four men resigned from any position over what appears to many to be a relatively harmless private conversation? Sure, there were some inappropriate comments and even a little alcohol consumption, but, really, what’s the big deal? right? After all, the conversation was largely one expressing frustration over the evolution/creation controversy and what could be done to release LSU from the constraints of church oversight, especially the Adventist Accrediting Agency (AAA). They argued against the required promotion of the faith positions of the church in science classes that, from their perspective, undermine the obvious discoveries of mainstream science and overwhelming empirical evidence on the topic of origins.

Frankly, I tend to sympathize with these men to a certain degree. After all, neither LSU nor the church had asked them to substantively change what they were teaching since the controversy erupted. The problem is that the General Conference Executive Committee at the 2004 Annual Council had asked all professors in Adventist schools to also present a rigorous defense of the Adventist perspective on origins in all classrooms:

“We call on all boards and educators at Seventh-day Adventist institutions at all levels to continue upholding and advocating the church’s position on origins. We, along with Seventh-day Adventist parents, expect students to receive a thorough, balanced, and scientifically rigorous exposure to and affirmation of our historic belief in a literal, recent six-day creation, even as they are educated to understand and assess competing philosophies of origins that dominate scientific discussion in the contemporary world.”

It is this official guidance of the church, as an organization, that has not taken place at LSU for several decades now. For example, consider that Dr. Bradley, in an interview with the secular journal Inside Higher Education, made several very honest statements regarding his personal position on the topic of origins and how he intended to continue to teach his students:

“Bradley, who is semi-retired after 38 years at La Sierra, has seen evolution debates erupt on campus before — and his traditional response is to “dive under the desk and wait for them to blow over.” In this instance, Bradley says he has the backing of his president, who wrote a letter to faculty, staff and trustees affirming the university’s role in the “important conversation of science and faith.”

Bradley says he’s felt no pressure to change anything about his course, and says bluntly that he doesn’t plan to turn his class into a theological seminar, or to present evolutionary theory only to then dismantle it for students. While he’s fine with helping students work through struggles of faith, Bradley says he won’t undercut decades of peer reviewed scientific research in the interest of religious consistency.

“I am not OK with getting up in a science course and saying most science is [b s ],” he said.

“It’s very, very clear that what I’m skeptical of is the absolute necessity of believing that the only way a creator God could do things is by speaking them into existence a few thousand years ago,” Bradley added. “That’s where my skepticism lies. That’s the religious philosophical basis for [his Christian] faith. There are more fundamental things, like Charles.
what I call the lunatic fringe. They do not represent the majority position in the Church, and yes I’m skeptical of that. But I want to say to kids it’s OK for you to believe that, but it’s not OK for you to be ignorant of the scientific data that’s out there.” In the Capstone Biology class for 2009, Bradley gave a 69-slide presentation entitled, “Hominin Evolution.” The fourth slide says: “Recent years have shown a dramatic increase in the discovery of hominid species that are intermediate between the great apes and modern humans.”

Clearly Dr. Bradley never intended to follow the educational guidelines of the church, past or present. Beyond this, several other science and even religion professors at LSU have voiced support for Bradley’s position and intention. Somewhat surprisingly then (in light of past inaction) the AAA, in response to the current controversy, did not fully renew LSU’s accreditation, but granted a probationary period of one year for LSU to improve its promotion of the church’s position on origins in science classrooms.

What seems a bit strange to me, however, is that Bradley wasn’t asked to resign until he uttered, in a private conversation, a few negative comments about particular individuals in the church’s hierarchy. It seems almost like the church leadership is more concerned over private comments against individuals than public comments and public actions that directly undermine the church’s “fundamental” positions and policies.

A few questions come to mind at this point: Why were church officials sent to apologize to LSU for the efforts of, for example, David Asscherick? Should not the situation that prompted Asscherick’s widely circulated letter have been addressed by LSU many years before? Why did Elder Jackson state, during the town hall meeting, that David Asscherick and the leadership of the Michigan Conference should be officially reprimanded by the church? – for trying to uphold the fundamental goals and ideals of the church within our own universities? Has the Adventist world turned upside down?

If the church claims that certain doctrinal teachings are, in fact, “fundamental” to its basic goals and mission, why then does it align itself with those who are most emphatically opposed to those positions? On the other hand, if the church is not really opposed to mainstream evolutionary theories on origins, or does not actually consider the issue of origins to be “fundamental,” why then doesn’t it make this new position clear to its worldwide constituents?

Do not the students and parents who are paying a great deal of money for a Seventh-day Adventist education deserve to know when a particular school is actively undermining one or more of the church’s doctrinal positions in its classrooms? Calling the church’s position scientifically untenable? Believed only by the church’s “lunatic fringe”? Don’t we all have a basic right to know what we are supporting with our tuition, tithes, and offerings?

In short then, my most basic wish for LSU and for the church at large is… Consistency and Transparency.

That’s it.

If the church, as an organization, really does believe in a literal six-day creation week as fundamental to the gospel message of hope, then the church, and all organizations owned and operated under the name “Seventh-day Adventist,” should be active in promoting this basic message. However, if the church does not really stand for these doctrinal positions, or if the church really cannot ensure unity on these basic issues within the various organizations that carry the church’s own name, then the church should be active in informing its worldwide membership of these facts. Those who send their children, their most precious possessions on this Earth, to a school that bears the name “Seventh-day Adventist” should not be misinformed or, worse yet, deceived as to what to expect from “Adventist Education”.

http://www.educatetruth.com/la-sierra-evidence/my-wish-for-la-sierra-un...
It simply isn’t right to for the church, or a church school like LSU, to advertise one thing in order to draw students (and donations) from Adventist families, but then deliver something “fundamentally different”. In anyone’s book, that’s false advertising. More than this, it’s a form of both deception and theft. It’s wrong, plain and simple.

At the very least, let’s be consistent and transparent when it comes to what we stand for as a church organization and what anyone can expect from Seventh-day Adventist education…
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The LSU Faculty Senate called an emergency session on Friday where an action was voted requesting the Board of Trustees not to accept the resignations. After graduation the Board met from 2 pm until approximately 8:30 pm.

On Tuesday in a meeting with faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences, Provost Steve Pawluk relayed a very brief message regarding the Board meeting.

The Board met in closed session and discussed issues relating to the resignations, including a letter received from the attorney for the three employees. The University’s legal counsel was present at the discussion. The Board referred the matter to counsel and has no further comment on the matter at this time. The resignations continue to be in effect.

With that announcement he began the proceedings for choosing a search committee to replace the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.