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Are They Wacko in Waco?

Pro Ecclesia, pro Texanam (“For the Church and for Texas”) —Baylor University motto

Dear Friends:

Baylor University President Robert Sloan has his work cut out. His call for the university at Waco, Texas to aim for top tier national recognition has been overshadowed by turmoil in the school’s athletic department, including the recent killing of basketball star Patrick Dennehy. The men’s head basketball coach has been fired, the athletic director has been forced to resign, and a teammate of Dennehy’s has been charged with his murder.

Although President Sloan was probably under no illusion that cleaning up a sports program that lavished gifts and under-the-table cash to certain players would necessarily endear him to die-hard “Bear” fans, he may not have anticipated such hand wringing from boosters who warn it is naïve to think that other notable schools are playing by the rules. There are even whispers that a losing program could lead to Sloan’s eventual departure.

Sloan is also aware of murmurings from alumni, faculty, parents and students over his proposals to tighten admission criteria and set higher standards for citations and scholarly leadership. Further, he has aroused the ire of academia for trying to “inject a mindless fundamentalism into the curriculum.”¹ Three years ago, science and religion professors objected when Sloan established the Michael Polanyi Center to discover whether mathematical and scientific formulas can prove an intelligent design behind creation.

Then there is the matter of Dr. Francis (Frank) J. Beckwith. In July, Beckwith was hired as an Associate Professor of Church-State Studies and Associate Director of the J. M. Dawson Institute for Church-State Studies at Baylor. He holds five earned degrees including a Ph.D. in philosophy from Fordham University and a Master of Juridical Studies degree from Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. He has also been a Research Fellow in Constitutional Studies & Political Thought in the James Madison Program in the Department of Politics at Princeton University.

Dr. Beckwith has published numerous books and periodicals that have appeared in academic journals in diverse disciplines including law, philosophy, theology, religion, ethics, and public policy.

I had the opportunity to enjoy a lunch break with Dr. Beckwith earlier this year at a week-long *Summit Ministries Conference* in Manitou Springs, Colorado. He is an articulate and energetic young man (liberals would add “Native-American” to his bio) who spends his vacations with teens at Summit camps—discussing topics like abortion, evolution, and homosexuality from a biblical worldview. Although I am very impressed with Dr. Beckwith, both personally and professionally, there are “scholars” in Waco who think he is wacko!

Among them are twenty-nine members of the J. M. Dawson family that have called on Baylor University to remove the new associate director from the institute that bears Dawson’s name.

That certain namesake graduated from Baylor in 1904 and served as pastor of First Baptist Church of Waco for more that 30 years. After retirement, Dawson became involved in public policy matters and authored *Separate Church and State Now*. His 1948 book is considered a watershed treatise on church-state issues.

In an open letter dated September 11, 2003, the Dawson family accused Dr. Beckwith of holding church-state positions contrary to those espoused by their forefather. "We are troubled," said the signors, "because Dr. Beckwith is a fellow of the Discovery Institute. . . [which] works to get the concept called 'intelligent design' into the science curriculum of public school textbooks, claiming that intelligent design is a scientific, not a religious, concept. In our judgment and in the judgment of the scientific community, this is a ruse for getting a religious notion into the public schools—clearly a violation of the separation of church and state."²

Neither Beckwith nor Sloan would deny that Baylor students need to be infused with the religious notion that Jesus Christ is Lord. In his *Spring 2003 State of the University Address*, Sloan said:

"Our nation has confronted evil in very real ways in recent days, but we know that the reality of evil in the world will not end with one toppled dictator. There is plenty yet to go around, including that which resides within our own souls. It is not a mere passing remark when Paul refers to this world in the opening phrases of Galatians as, 'This present evil age.' It reflects a theologically profound view of the world which suggests that good and evil are not merely abstract choices but enormous forces that touch not only individuals, but groups, institutions, nations, and even global and invisible realities. It is a profound statement, as applicable today as in ancient civilization. If ever we needed in our world the message and mercy of the Lord of redemption and grace, it is today. And if ever the world needed a place committed unequivocally to the creation of leaders to be salt and light, it is now. It is vital to talk about the prospects of being a truly Christian university and the challenging road to get there..."

"...I believe our commitment to the recruitment and retention of faculty who proclaim the confession "Jesus Christ is Lord" does not inevitably lead to narrowness, mediocrity, or parochialism. . . I believe that minds of the very first order are available across the disciplines and from within the ranks of the Christian faithful."

Evidently, trustees who hired Robert Sloan believe he has power as head of the university, to bring about moral, ethical, and academic change to their beleaguered institution. The trouble is, there seems to be little infrastructure left on campus or in the community to support his erstwhile efforts. There are too few sports fans who favor a code of honor, too few students or parents who believe in the pursuit of excellence, and far too many faculty that are, frankly, at enmity with God.

Certainly we have placed the same expectations and more on the shoulders of another man who currently occupies the White House. But is that man able to move a moral agenda against the desires of a culture sorely in need of a religious awakening? Can he succeed without the consent and assistance of parents in the home, leaders in the Church, and teachers in our schools?

I think we all know the answer.

Sincerely,

Rick Forcier
Executive Director

¹ *A Man for All Seasons*, Northside Newspapers, Aug 14, 2003

² Knox, Marv, *Descendants of Baylor Institute's Namesake Call for Removal of Associate Director*, The Baptist Standard, Sept 19, 2003