

# Making BYU the Lord's University

MUSINGS UPON RETIREMENT

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The BYU community's continued dedication to Christ and His gospel builds a culture worthy of being called the Lord's university.





# Is BYU the Lord's university?

I have pondered this rhetorical question as my tenure at BYU ends, and this essay details experiences I have reflected on while attempting to answer the question. At times I have heard the question posed in jest or even voiced with intonation and body language that clearly indicated mockery. However, I have concluded that the real question is not institutional but rather individual: Are those who study, teach, and serve at BYU the Lord's people? The answer ultimately depends on the extent members of the BYU community follow the Savior and emulate His life and teachings.

The Lord's people should not be ashamed of gospel truths, which should be incorporated into and taught alongside secular knowledge. When I joined BYU in 2003, I was invited to make my courses spiritually strengthening. I wondered how professors of finance or construction management worked spiritual topics into their courses. How could I possibly incorporate any religious aspect into my own classes on acoustic phonetics or psycholinguistics? However, as I settled into my life at BYU, there were times I was prompted to share my gratitude for the Savior or a gospel principle in class, even though it was completely unrelated to the topic at hand. In those instances, I did not find out until the end of the semester, while reading student evaluations, that those three minutes of tangential gospel reference gave a few students a spiritual boost that they needed.

I soon learned that I could introduce gospel discussion through illustrations of the scientific method as the path to furthering knowledge of the physical world. The search for scientific truth could be easily expanded into discussions of how spiritual truths are discov-

ered. When examining the complexities of human language, the vocal apparatus, and the miraculous way in which children effortlessly learn a language, I often paused and pointed out the incredible complexity of speech and language, which, in my mind, evinces the existence of an intelligent designer. Not only was I unafraid to share gospel truths in class, but I relished the opportunities. This freedom of and interest in religious discussions among all areas of study can make BYU the Lord's university.

Some institutions of higher education believe and teach that science and religion are wholly incompatible, suggesting that, as people become more educated, their expanded knowledge naturally leads them to understand it is naïve to believe in God. However, a crucial part of a BYU education is daily student interaction with a host of staff and faculty members who serve as living examples that a belief in God and a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ are not undermined by their high educational attainment or their commitment to the scholarly enterprise. Some critics believe that BYU faculty work in an intellectually stifling environment. In my experience, the ability to freely integrate the secular and spiritual creates a wonderful opportunity for intellectual growth. Should the Lord's university provide anything less?

Once, while working at a state-sponsored university, I was directing a Spanish conversation course designed to prepare students for a study abroad program, and I planned a classroom activity in which students were asked to share a life experience that was particularly meaningful to them. One of the students in the class was a middle-aged woman who had come back later in life to finish her degree. When it was her turn to speak, she explained how her good husband had recently died and how much she missed him. At that moment, I detected the Spirit of the Lord prompting other students to express meaningful experiences that illustrated their thankfulness for their families—even at a secular university.

My first instinct was to identify the Spirit and ask the students what it was teaching them. I knew that most of the students were Christians and would probably not object, yet I realized that if I were to discuss religion or religious experience as an employee of a state-funded school, I could put my employment in jeopardy. I chose to let that



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powerful teaching moment silently pass. My freedom to discuss profound truth was stifled in that institution. In contrast, at BYU I am not only free but encouraged to incorporate discussions of both secular and spiritual truths in class, a characteristic of the Lord's university which for me has been liberating rather than constraining.

As a faculty member, I have participated in professional conferences at which attendees wear tags displaying their name on the first line and university affiliation on the second. My affiliation—Brigham Young University—may cause people to add a third, “invisible” line: **BELIEVER IN GOD**.

A banquet is often held on the last day of these conferences, and at one of these events I entered a ballroom full of set tables ready to be served. As I looked around the room, I caught sight of a woman vigorously motioning for me to join her. I was relieved to have an invitation to a table and recognized her as someone I had previously met in a different conference. She was very excited to talk to me. She asked if I remembered our conversation from the banquet at the previous conference. Four years had gone by, and I, frankly, did not. She informed me that we had sat together with a few other professors, some of whom, upon seeing that I belonged to Brigham Young University, challenged my beliefs and berated me for acknowledging the existence of God. Reminding me of that conversation was the source of her enthusiasm. She profusely thanked me for holding fast to my religious values and let me know that, because of my actions, she had decided to become a more faithful Catholic and no longer hide from her professional peers that she believed in God. The rest of the professors at the table, although atheists, joined us in a cordial discussion of religion during the remainder of the dinner. I came away feeling honored to carry Brigham Young University on my name tag and grateful for the opportunity to represent the Lord and His university.

While directing a study abroad program, I observed the power of my students' willingness to be examples of Christian living and representatives of the Lord's university. Our coach driver was an Irishman who got to know us as he spent two weeks hauling our group from site to site in Ireland and Wales. He was not a talkative man but did mention that, when he saw he was assigned a university group, he was less

than enthusiastic due to previous university groups he had dealt with. However, he quickly changed his mind as he observed the daily behavior of our BYU group. We were polite, modest, and clean. Our interactions with him and with each other were completely lacking in contentious or vulgar language. Of course, we started each day on the bus with a brief prayer. These students transported the spirit of the Y across the ocean and could not have been better ambassadors for their university, country, or Savior.

We said goodbye to the driver at Caernarfon Castle, part way through our trip, singing “God Be with You Till We Meet Again.” We received a message from him a few days later. In the message, he explained that he had lost his wife several years before and, in his grief, given up belief in God. He acknowledged that his belief in the Creator had been rekindled as the result of the time he spent with our BYU students. I believe this powerful, faith-defining Spirit is common of the people that make up BYU campus and thus allows it to become the Lord's campus.

I am convinced that it is not only the discussion of gospel truths in the classroom that makes the Lord pleased to accept BYU as His. BYU is the Lord's university to the extent that those who are associated with BYU demonstrate Christlike behavior. I am deeply grateful that my name has been associated with our university, as well as for the times that so many BYU people have been examples that would make the Lord pleased to call BYU His university. **H**

