

Taylor Grads - Open Letter to the TU Faculty Behind “Excalibur”

March 7, 2018

Dear Jim Spiegel, Gary Ross, Richard Smith, Ben Wehling:

In your formerly anonymous paper “Excalibur,” you stated that your intention was to “artfully generate discussion and alternative views.” This is a wonderful goal, but one for which your method has been well critiqued (for example, by the Echo Editorial Board, which said “Anonymity does not provide adequate means of contact. This, in turn, robs those with counter insight the space to meet with the writer and voice their thoughts... In this way, we think the execution of Excalibur misses the mark”). Nevertheless, in the days since publication, much conversation *has* ensued. The conversation has spread quickly well beyond Taylor, with articles appearing as far as conservative websites unaffiliated with TU or its stakeholders and even a brief reflection in the international publication *Inside Higher Ed*. It has also raised a stir among many alumni, including us. We wish to take you for your word that you *do* want discussion and alternate views and thus enter into dialogue about the ideas that you shared through your paper.

We are alumni who have remained in community with one another and with current Taylor stakeholders across many years. We are not part of the immediate TU community at present, and thus our commentary is not directed at what is happening there. We do not presume to critique your intentions or your perception of need for a conservative voice at TU, even if these claims surprise us. Rather, we wish to critique the facts of the writing and ideas presented in the paper. This, too, is what you called for in wishing that by withholding your identities, focus would be placed “on the issues.” We will respect that.

In an anonymous publication, authors do not have credibility, however deserving they may be. In a first edition of an underground paper, the paper itself has no credibility, either. What we are left with, therefore, is the quality of the arguments. The arguments set forth in this paper lack both coherence and substance. Both articles regurgitate ideas that are present in manifold sources including and especially the Heritage Foundation. In absence of coherence, substantive rationale, or originality, the paper is thus left with no redeeming quality. Rather, this paper has served to *deepen* fault lines on campus, strike *fear* in some students, and evoke *anger* among some parents, students, faculty, and alum (as evidenced in the discussion board present on the now defunct Res Publica).

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The Shepherd's Voice

In “The Shepherd's Voice,” you, Gary Ross, made the statement: **“I believe that a compelling case can be made that the social justice movements sweeping across western culture and that are by extension confronting the church, are... strangers entering our midst.”** We first would call out that this claim is left unsubstantiated. In absence of justification, your belief would be better called an opinion. The apparent attempt to support this opinion included the following:

1. Claiming that social justice is at odds with “the classic Western concept of justice.”
2. Claiming that social justice has roots in the works of Karl Marx.
3. Claiming that social justice will weaken the church’s response to contemporary issues.

These arguments are disjointed and are themselves left thoroughly unsupported by evidence or citations (the lone reference being to Molinari, who is simply used to articulate one view of social justice movements in different levels). More seriously still, none of these ideas clearly support the point that they purport to strengthen. How does your conception of social justice make it a “stranger” to the church? You don’t say.

Rather, there is a strong emphasis on the “Western” and “American” way of doing things, and an implicit tone that these are the *right* way to do things. In the above quote, your correspondence of “western culture” with “the church” by extension is troubling. Contemporary (and what you call “classic”) Western culture and American values are constructs that were *foreign* in the time and life of Jesus. Further, they

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remain foreign today to many in the Church in non-American, non-Westernized parts of the world. So why is “the classic Western concept of justice” your measuring reed, and not the life and message of Christ?

The connection of social justice to Karl Marx appears to serve the purpose of a red herring. Few, if any, proponents of social justice today look to Marx for inspiration. Few, if any, proponents of social justice today stand for murdering, let alone massacring, those with whom we disagree. To suggest that the contemporary American idea of “social justice” is parallel to Marxist genocides is frankly dishonest and overt false equivocation. A stronger

argument would have taken into account how Jesus’ extremely egalitarian ministry with repeated emphasis on equity for groups that had been traditionally disenfranchised is not well answered by contemporary social justice movements and how we can and should improve thereupon. That simply didn’t happen.

It is true that “social justice” is an ill-defined term. Social justice means different things to different people in different contexts. That does make it difficult to defend in any holistic way. When we ourselves have seen social justice being discussed in our churches and contexts, it has been language used to bring restoration to communities of people who have been unfairly disenfranchised (sometimes for generations). It’s been used to discuss how we can support veterans who now find themselves homeless and unable to hold work because of lingering trauma from their wartime experience. It has been used to discuss how we can support and lift up battered women and children in the context of abusive partners. How we can prevent human trafficking. Restore families broken by the opioid epidemic. It is a catch-all for the work of interfaith and secular people as we strive to address systemic issues that plague our world.

Social justice, in short, is often used in a way that is more reminiscent of Jesus than Marx. For us, social justice is an explicit valuation of human life in all of its diversity and struggle well beyond the womb. It is a recognition that justice needn’t only be individual, but systemic. And must be. Where it is used to hurt, to commit violence, to oppress, we– and others who support restorative forms of social justice– condemn it. Your mischaracterization of social justice is indicative of either gross ignorance on the topic

or willful deceit in attempt to discredit contemporary social justice movements. As Ravi Zacharias famously said, “Never judge a worldview by its abuse.”

The Importance of Imago Dei

In “The Importance of Imago Dei,” you, Jim Spiegel, present the first creation account (Genesis 1:1 - 2:2), drawing from 1:27, which states “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.” This singular verse is then used as foundation for positions on five major issues stretching from pro-life stance to animal rights (or lack thereof). It is important to recognize that the verse *itself* does not support those positions. Generations of theologians have contributed to the editorializing and usage of this verse to apply to those positions. Indeed, you seem to hint to this reality when you recognize that “Christians are historically divided on certain issues.” You list several, but you fail to note that many born-again, Bible-believing Christians today are divided on the very issues you list in the bullets of your article. To gloss over the very real disagreements in the church on these matters is to do disservice to conversation around them.

You conclude with “One who rejects this crucial tenet of Biblical anthropology no longer espouses an essential Christian theology.” In this statement, it is unclear if you mean that Christians must believe that we are created in the image of God as essential theology or if you mean that—by extension—we must agree on issues of abortion, euthanasia, duty to the poor and disabled, creationism without evolution, and animals’ (lack of) strong rights. In either case, such a strong claim needs support. What makes *that* doctrine essential? According to whom? Jesus makes no such statement and poses no such requirement. Who are you – *who are any of us?* – to declare what is “essential Christian theology?” For that, we believe that the voice of Jesus outranks us all.

Benediction and Call

These challenging times have lead us all to reflect on our Taylor experience; many of us recall growing in our intellectual, spiritual, and social capacity because of powerful dialogue with colleagues and instructors alike that stretched our ideas, and thoughtfully challenged our beliefs. We believe and expect this to be the foundation of a good education, especially in higher ed. Work such as “Excalibur” fails to live up to this tradition not because of the conservative positions you take, but because in word and deed, this paper and its distribution did more to silence than to lend voice. It did more to fester than to heal. It did more to dampen original thinking than to enrich it.

If you are intent in planting your feet in your journey of faith, then we call you to reflect on your mission at TU and as educators, considering how your actions in this paper and otherwise may serve as a stumbling block to students who are continuing to journey toward God’s infinite complexity and wonder.

We believe you can do better. We believe in the students, faculty, and mission of Taylor University.

The Church has *a/ways* had fault lines. It always will. That’s okay. And more than that, it’s exciting. God will always outstrip our theology and our miniscule conceptions. Because of this, the very worst thing we can presume to do is to limit God’s complex glory to trite bullet points, tie God to Western (or any other) culture exclusively, or silence the voices of our sisters and brothers whose experience and relationship with our infinite God have led them to different conclusions than our own. We are standing in solidarity with all those at TU today who are openly discussing these and other issues, who are listening and trying to understand one another, and who continue to submit their limited conceptions of God back to God.

We call you, Jim Spiegel, Gary Ross, Richard Smith, and Ben Wehling to reflect and embody your commitment to the mission of Taylor University and fulfill your roles as stewards to the young minds and hearts seeking this institution. We call you to use your voice, including that of Excalibur if you continue to publish it, and to genuinely facilitate thoughtful dialogue. We call you to engage with students and colleagues, and shift from an emphasis on debate to an emphasis on progressive discussion that encourages growth in and a hunger for Truth.

We encourage you to meaningfully engage with those that are disabled, of lower income, of different ethnicity, and LGBTQ, and to be more willing to listen to those who take a more progressive stance on difficult or controversial subjects. We found many of your claims about these groups inconsistent with their reality. For example, Jim Spiegel, where you suggest that disabled people need “protection” (from whom? able-bodied Christians?), the reality is that most disabled folks simply want to be respected and included and find the notion of needing “protection and care” frankly derogatory. If you had consulted the disabled community, this point would have been resoundingly clear before you wrote.

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Listening, reflecting, and seeking all require being vulnerable and admitting that we don't have all the answers. They require willingness to let go of conclusions to return to experience with God and creation. It is in such moments that faith is renewed, as articulated by the Biblical Moses and Elijah and Paul and Mary Magdalene and the contemporary Christians C.S. Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle and Annie Dillard among so many others. We trust that in so doing, you will be able to contribute to a powerful “Taylor Experience” like many of us fondly remember.

With hope and faith in the tireless Taylor community,

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