
Today's News

Friday, March 7, 2008

Termination of 2 Tenured Bible Professors Leads to Unease at University in Ohio

By [JOHN GRAVOIS](#)

The termination of two tenured Bible professors last summer at Cedarville University has plunged the Baptist institution in Ohio into months of turmoil and intrigue. It has also prompted the American Association of University Professors to open an investigation.

The imbroglio has occurred against the backdrop of a deeper theological debate within the university over degrees of certainty about the truth of the Bible. But the divide is not merely over doctrine. Last week, a grievance panel at the institution reached a split decision in favor of one of the fired professors, citing administrative missteps as part of its rationale.

The climate at Cedarville was decried openly in a letter written by prominent past and current faculty members and published in January. The letter, which was circulated to the university's professors, administrators, and trustees, described what it characterized as a climate of fear at Cedarville, where many faculty members worry that tenure means little. "There is a general reluctance on the part of faculty to disagree" with the administration "for fear of retribution," the letter said.

Early last July, Cedarville notified David Hoffeditz and David Mappes, both tenured professors in the university's biblical-studies department, that their contracts at the university were being terminated. That notice came just a few months after the university had issued the two professors employment contracts for the 2007-8 academic year.

Shortly thereafter, the university posted a statement on its Web site saying that "for some time now, certain issues in the department of biblical education have distracted the attention and energies of the university from its critical purpose." In an effort to "restore a healthy team spirit within the department," the statement said, the university had taken "personnel actions resulting in the departure of two faculty members."

The statement then said that the university's "commitments to the inerrancy of Scripture, to its historic doctrinal position, and to its conservative theological heritage have not changed."

That abrupt transition from "team spirit" to "the inerrancy of Scripture" hints at the deeper theological backdrop of the controversy at Cedarville—a battle between modernity and postmodernity that has become both political and personal, according to many observers. Mr. Hoffeditz and Mr. Mappes see themselves as sitting squarely on the modern, more conservative side of that conflict.

The university has declined to outline its reasons for terminating Mr. Hoffeditz and Mr. Mappes in any greater detail, citing confidentiality requirements. Cedarville administrators and a lawyer for the university also declined repeated requests for comment from *The Chronicle*, except to say that the

university "intends to follow its grievance process."

Last week, one stage of that process came to a conclusion when a faculty panel investigating the termination of Mr. Hoffeditz released a report, which was obtained by *The Chronicle*. In a split decision, the panel found in favor of the professor.

The panel stated that the university's dispute with Mr. Hoffeditz is just one aspect of a "unique period of turbulence" at the university, one "given root by a Bible department unable to resolve its long-standing interpersonal and philosophical differences, essentially forcing a young administration to commandeer a thorny, multidimensional problem in order to solve it."

"In this particular case," the panel concluded, "a Christ-centered community we are not."

Grievance Turned Inward

Mr. Mappes and Mr. Hoffeditz both filed grievances with the university after receiving their notices of termination. In a brief interview with *The Chronicle*, Mr. Mappes said he later suspended his grievance "in hopes of having an amicable parting of ways."

Mr. Hoffeditz, however, pursued his complaint. And last week, the five-member faculty Grievance Investigation Panel found in his favor.

The panel wrote that Mr. Hoffeditz "overstated his case in some instances and could have been more forthright in his position." The panel also accused both professor and university of acting "uncharitably and unprofessionally."

But the panel's report reserved the bulk of its criticism for the administration. The grievance panel found that Mr. Hoffeditz did not receive any "written reprimands, warnings, or plans of correction" from the administration before he was handed his notice of termination, despite the university's assertion last summer that "every other option" short of termination had been "exhausted."

The panel also said that it "understands the university position to be that Dr. Hoffeditz insisted that his colleagues adhere to doctrinal positions that are not in the [university's] doctrinal statement." But the grievance panel found that Mr. Hoffeditz did not breach the doctrinal statement.

In scrutinizing the university's handling of Mr. Hoffeditz, the grievance panel even turned its investigation in on itself. "The university attorney has had significant influence on the process," the panel wrote. "The dual role of the university attorney, serving as counsel to both the university and the GIP, gives rise to conflict of interest concerns."

That particular finding, along with several other aspects of Mr. Hoffeditz's case, has caught the eye of the American Association of University Professors, which has opened an investigation of the turmoil at Cedarville.

"What complicates this case is that we are dealing with a church-related institution which makes quite explicit limitations on academic freedom," said B. Robert Kreiser, an associate secretary of the AAUP's department of academic freedom, tenure, and governance. "The question here is whether the institution acted within those stated limitations."

An additional complication is that the university has commanded the panel to deliver all records of its hearings to the office of the president. According to recent e-mail correspondence from the grievance committee chairman, forwarded to *The Chronicle* by Mr. Hoffeditz, that order comes despite rules governing the grievance process that say that no one outside the panel should have access to the tapes and transcripts of the panel's meetings.

"The only copy of everything is now in the hands of the administration," said Mr. Kreiser. "That's very disturbing."

But much of Mr. Kreiser's concern is more basic. "Under the principles of tenure, a faculty member cannot be dismissed without the administration demonstrating adequate cause," he said. "Customarily, the burden is on the administration."

But by all indications of the way the process was set up, Mr. Kreiser said, "the burden was on Professor Hoffeditz to show why he shouldn't have been dismissed."

Certainty or Assurance

A theological impasse dividing Cedarville's campus has also played a role in the controversy. Known as the "truth and certainty debate," the dispute involves a somewhat rarefied but hotly contested question of faith: Can Christians enjoy *certainty* of Biblical truth, or do they merely have the *assurance* of their faith that the Bible is factual?

It is a question that folds into a still larger debate over how much Christianity should reconcile with the intellectual context of postmodernity. Those who hold to a belief in certainty, Mr. Hoffeditz and Mr. Mappes among them, tend to consider themselves more theologically conservative.

Those theological themes figured prominently in the open letter written this January to the faculty, administration, and trustees of Cedarville by a group of 14 current and emeritus Cedarville faculty members—a group calling itself the "Coalition of the Concerned."

That letter refers to Mr. Mappes and Mr. Hoffeditz—and also to three other professors who either resigned or were denied tenure in the 2006-7 academic year—as "theologically conservative" members of the Bible department. "There is fear that other theologically conservative members within the department and the general faculty may be terminated," the letter says.

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