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Bible profs' firings leave college unsettled

Theological dispute shakes Cedarville's identity

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CEDARVILLE, Ohio -- The firing of two tenured Bible professors at Cedarville University in the summer has disrupted the ordinarily peaceful campus and created what critics say is an identity crisis for the Baptist institution.

The university terminated the professors amid a brewing abstract theological dispute known as the "truth and certainty" debate. The issue is between fundamentalists who hold that the truth of the Bible can be known with certainty, and "emergent" believers who hold that Christians can only be assured of the truth because only God can know with certainty.

Fundamentalists take a historical view of the Bible's truth and apply its statements literally. For example, they hold firm to the book of Genesis' explanation that God created Earth in six days.

But less literal followers, known as the Emergent Church, put the Bible into the context of the modern world, deconstructing and reconstructing Christianity with other faiths to arrive at an assurance that the Bible is true.

For nonevangelical Christians, the difference might appear minor. But to fundamentalists, questioning the truth of the Bible is blasphemous and rattles their core belief system.

Cedarville has been fundamentalist, or orthodox, since becoming a Baptist institution in 1953, and it requires all its students to minor in the Bible. But the new, emergent views on truth and certainty had crept into the Bible department, say students and faculty members, creating a schism.

The fired professors, David Mappes and David Hoffeditz, were on the fundamentalist, conservative side. Their supporters say they were fired because they openly challenged other faculty members' more liberal interpretations of the Bible in the classroom.

Mappes and Hoffeditz were fired in July despite receiving new contracts just a few months earlier. The university said the firings were not the result of doctrinal debate.

The department's attention had been distracted, and trustees fired the men "in order to restore a healthy team spirit" because they had behaved in a less-than-collegial manner, the university said. A 2006 board resolution prohibits the faculty from giving any instruction

inconsistent with the school's fundamentalist position.

In January, a group of prominent current and emeritus faculty members called the Coalition of the Concerned wrote an open letter to administrators and trustees that described a "climate of fear" regarding tenure and raised concerns about "the perception that Cedarville University is drifting away from its historic conservative theological position and identity as a Baptist institution."

"This is a historic change, much as the administration may try to deny it," said Cedarville emeritus professor Raymond Bartholomew, a fundamentalist and member of the coalition, whose CedarvilleSituation.com addresses the issue. "We've never had a glimmer of any controversy like this before."

"The issues at hand do not reflect a change in the university's mission," the university responded in a recent e-mail. "... Our commitment to God's word as inspired, infallible and inerrant is unwavering."

Some students simply don't accept the university's explanation, said Keith Rice, a senior engineering student.

"I don't know anyone who doesn't have an opinion on this," he said. "There is a tremendous amount of skepticism of the administration. ... All the controversy, all the debate was focused on the faculty, and they framed it as interpersonal. But students know there is an underlying theological issue."

After Mappes and Hoffeditz were fired, student Josh Storts met with Robert Milliman, Cedarville's academic vice president, to ask about the terminations. Storts recorded the conversation without Milliman's knowledge, which is legal in Ohio.

In the widely circulated recording, obtained by the *Dayton Daily News* from a file-sharing Web site, Milliman says he preferred to hold up Mappes' and Hoffeditz's contracts to prevent a "campus furor" during a three-day visit in March by the North Central Association Higher Learning Commission, which accredits colleges and universities in 19 states, including Ohio.

"We did not want to take these actions before our accreditation visit because we felt ... because, you know, if everyone was stirred up, there's going to be this problem with accreditation," Milliman says in the recording.

The college went ahead and renewed their contracts. "We were told if you don't issue contracts before the visit, there could be trouble. (The faculty) knew we weren't going to cause a furor with terminating people before the NCA came."

Asked about Milliman's statements in the recording, Cedarville said in its e-mail to the *Dayton Daily News* that the accreditation team's visit did not affect the timing of the personnel decisions.

"No specific course of action regarding the personnel actions had yet been determined," it said.

The controversy doesn't appear to be going away soon. Hoffeditz is pursuing a grievance against Cedarville, drawing the attention of the American Association of University Professors, a faculty advocacy group.

A university grievance investigation panel recommended Hoffeditz's reinstatement, but the administration has seized all the records of that panel's investigation, in apparent violation of grievance procedures.

Robert Kreiser, associate secretary of the professors association, said that his group is most interested in the procedures used to fire Hoffeditz.

It might also look into the academic-freedom issue, "because while many Christian universities place limitations on academic freedom, retaliation toward a faculty member is not a religious issue," he said.

Bartholomew says he has received dozens of e-mails from parents of prospective Cedarville students asking about the situation.

"It's seen as dangerous because it could fracture their child's faith," he said. "And they don't want to spend \$100,000 on that."

Meanwhile, Cedarville students crave more discussion on the cultural shift in evangelical Christianity and the university's stance on it, Rice said.

"This situation is going to get worse. There won't be resolution until (university officials) lay out something more specific about where they stand."

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