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Secret recording suggests firings timed to avoid furor

A theological issue splits the conservative Baptist school and could pose a threat to future enrollment.

By [Stephanie Gottschlich](#)

Staff Writer

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CEDARVILLE — Last July, Cedarville University told tenured Bible professors David Hoffeditz and David Mappes it was terminating their contracts, less than four months after those contracts had been renewed for the 2007-08 academic year.

The firings stemmed from an intense theological debate that appeared to divide Bible department faculty and raised concerns and questions about the university's theological base.

Observers say Cedarville is caught up in a debate within evangelical Christianity over whether or not it can know for certain that scriptures in the Bible are true. Fundamentalists take a historical view of the Bible's truth and apply its statements literally, for example holding firm to the book of Genesis explanation of the Earth's creation, 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 the Bible is true.

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

Cedarville historically has been fundamentalist, or orthodox, since becoming a Baptist institution in 1953. At issue is whether professors in the university's Bible department were promoting beliefs of the emerging church movement, creating a split among faculty that could not be resolved.

Shortly after the university notified Hoffeditz and Mappes via certified letter July 9 of their terminations, it posted a statement online that said the personnel actions were taken only after every other option was exhausted to restore "team spirit."

The university told students, faculty and staff in November that it found no evidence of faculty deviating from its conservative doctrinal statement, and that the debate was limited within its confines.

But the disagreements did result in "labeling, negative communication and misrepresentation among faculty colleagues," it said. As a result, Mappes and Hoffeditz were fired.

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

Some, however, remained skeptical.

In a letter to the university

in January, a group of 16 current and emeritus faculty called the Coalition of the Concerned raised "grave concerns" about the climate at Cedarville — a climate the coalition says led to the departure of five theologically conservative Bible department faculty at the end of the 2006-07 academic year.

In an e-mail to the Dayton Daily News on March 21, Cedarville officials said they recognized there would always be differences of opinion among faculty.

"However, as a Christ-centered institution that stands firmly for truth while fostering a spirit of collegiality and academic freedom, these differences must be within the boundaries of the University's doctrinal statement."

The terminations, the university said, resulted from some mean-spirited behavior among faculty, not because some of them deviated from the school's doctrine.

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

"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," he said.

Cedarville Emeritus Professor Raymond Bartholomew, an observer of the controversy who writes about it on CedarvilleSituation.com, said the faculty were "uncollegial only in the sense that they raised these questions about doctrine."

Students know Mappes and Hoffeditz are clear-cut conservatives, Rice said, and they were openly challenging other faculty members' views in the classroom.

Student's

secret recording

After the firings, Cedarville 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 March accreditation visit by the North Central Association, the accrediting body for Ohio's colleges and universities.

But the university decided to grant contracts to them, along with the rest of faculty, on March 16, because attorneys' advised that they could terminate them later, he says in the audio.

"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.

"We were told if you don't issue contracts before the visit there could be trouble. (Faculty) knew we weren't going to cause a furor with terminating people before the NCA came."

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

"No specific course of action regarding the personnel actions had yet been determined," the university said. It had sought the advice of legal counsel, but said "the process was ongoing." When the university offered contracts to Mappes and Hoffeditz, "they were offered in good faith, and the University had every intent to fulfill them" and that it continues to pay them salary and benefits.

AAUP investigating

According to Hoffeditz, he received no previous disciplinary warnings before being fired.

In a statement he posted on a personal Web site, Hoffeditz said he was never given opportunity to view the evidence used to fire him and feels the decision was unilateral. He removed those statements March 19. He declined to talk about his termination, citing possible litigation.

"Our hearts break over this," Hoffeditz said. "My wife and I seek reconciliation with the Bible department and restoration of my job." Both Hoffeditz and his wife, who continues to work at Cedarville, are second-generation Cedarville alumni.

Hoffeditz's lawyer, Mark Miller, said the administration's actions in dealing with Hoffeditz, including new information in the audio recording, raise a "host of issues, obviously concerning."

Hoffeditz and Mappes filed grievances against the university after their terminations. Mappes dropped his, but in late February the grievance investigation panel voted in favor of Hoffeditz and recommended to the board of trustees he be reinstated. The panel found the administration did not issue written warnings or plans of correction to Hoffeditz before terminating him.

But one week later, on March 3, Cedarville administrators ordered the grievance investigation panel

to turn over all transcripts and documentation of Hoffeditz's hearing to the board chair and school legal counsel, despite grievance procedures that stipulate the information is not to be shared with administrators, according to Hoffeditz.

The university declined to comment on Hoffeditz's grievance process because it is "ongoing" and is required to keep grievance matters confidential, but said that a decision by a grievance panel goes to the university president, who then makes a recommendation along with the panel's decision to the board of trustees. A committee of trustees make the final decision.

The seizure of the grievance panel's records is "disturbing" to the American Association of University Professors, a nearly

100-year old national faculty advocacy group with 45,000 members, which is investigating Hoffeditz's firing.

"We're concerned because they've got the only copy of the record, and Mr. Hoffeditz doesn't have access to it or the evidence for his defense," said Robert Kreiser, associate secretary for the AAUP.

The AAUP is most interested in the procedures used to fire Hoffeditz, Kreiser said. It also may look into the academic freedom issue, "because while many Christian universities place limitations on academic freedom, retaliation towards a faculty member is not a religious issue," he said.

The university said last week it will not participate in the AAUP investigation. As a private institution, Cedarville will continue to follow its governing documents and applicable law, it said.

"In this case, we are unaware of any authority or jurisdiction possessed by the AAUP over the university," it said.

The AAUP, which

handles 1,000 complaints a year and looks into about 100, said the university's resistance "is not unique, but it is also not common."

Issues catch attention beyond Cedarville

A recent decision to cancel the lecture of a Christian social activist Shane Claiborne, an evangelist with more emergent church leanings, highlights the lingering questions over the university's doctrinal identity.

Cedarville administrators canceled the Feb. 11 lecture after criticism from conservative evangelicals to avoid

risking sending the wrong message about its doctrinal identity.

Cedarville said it invited Claiborne to campus to provide students an opportunity "to think critically and Biblically and engage issues that are shaping the church and impacting society." Its intended purpose, it said, was "overshadowed by accusations about Cedarville's theological commitments. We needed to make a tough decision to avoid further distraction."

In addition, in June 2006, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches severed ties with Cedarville because of its unofficial relationship with Southern Baptists, who the association condemns for its inclusiveness of other faiths, according to Christianity Today, a magazine for evangelical Christians. The State Convention of Baptists in Ohio, which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, began endorsing the school in 2002 to Ohio southern Baptists. Cedarville had been associated with GARBC since its Baptist founding in 1953.

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

"It's seen as dangerous because it could fracture their child's faith," Bartholomew 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, according to Rice.

"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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Cedarville University

Private, nonprofit institution founded in 1887 by the Presbyterian church. Became a Baptist institution in 1953 when the Baptist Bible Institute of Cleveland bought it.

President is William Brown, who replaced long-time President Paul Dixon in 2003.

STUDENTS

Undergraduate enrollment of 3,090 in 2005.

95 percent of undergraduates are white, 2 percent Hispanic,

2 percent black/non-Hispanic and 1 percent Asian.

98 percent are younger than age 24.

FINANCES

Costs \$25,886 in tuition, room and board each year.

Had revenues of \$77.9 million and expenses of

\$73.6 million in 2005, with \$95 million in net assets.

ACADEMICS

Offers 111 programs of study, including 73 undergraduate degrees, 40 minors, a few graduate degrees

in education and soon a professional pharmacy degree.

Employs 211 full-time faculty and 70 adjuncts.

THEOLOGY

Integrates an evangelical Biblical worldview into all courses.

Requires all students to minor in Bible and attend daily chapel services during the week.


All faculty and staff sign Cedarville's doctrinal statement as a condition of employment.

Cedarville historically holds to fundamentalist Christian belief that the Bible — God's Word — is inspired, infallible and inerrant truth; that Scripture is the final authority; the literal six-day account of creation in the Bible; and that Christians have a duty to evangelize to help others be "born-again," or "saved."

SOURCE: Cedarville University, Ohio Board of Regents

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