

5 Departures on Patrick Henry Faculty Pose Question: Are Christianity and Liberal Arts Contradictory Missions?

By [THOMAS BARTLETT](#)

For such a small college, Patrick Henry sure attracts big-time attention. It has been featured in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Economist*. *The New Yorker* also weighed in with a lengthy piece. Just last month the Discovery Times Channel broadcast an in-depth documentary on Patrick Henry titled *God's Next Army*.

Not bad for a college that opened its doors in 2000 and has around 300 students. The news media see Patrick Henry as the Christian college with a right-wing political agenda -- and for good reason. Its stated mission is to prepare undergraduates, most of whom were home-schooled, to "lead our nation and shape our culture with timeless biblical values."

Patrick Henry students have interned for top Republican honchos like Bill Frist, Tom DeLay, and Karl Rove. Janet Ashcroft, wife of the former attorney general, sits on the Board of Trustees. The college makes no secret of its ideological leanings; rather, it flaunts them.

It also boasts of its classical liberal-arts curriculum. The vision was that Patrick Henry would become as rigorous and prestigious as an Ivy League institution, but with a firm religious grounding -- a faith-based Harvard.

But a core group of Patrick Henry professors now question that much-publicized commitment to the liberal arts. Five of its 16 full-time professors, two of whom have been there from the beginning, are leaving after a bitter battle over academic freedom. Their departures have shaken the campus and created doubts about the college's future.

They have also raised questions that cut to the heart of Christian higher education, such as: Can a Christian find truth in the writings of non-Christians? What role should the Bible play in the classroom? Should a Christian college student grapple with the same philosophers and the same issues as any other student? Or are certain ideas too worldly to address?

The controversy has pitted the college's president and founder, Michael P. Farris, against many of its professors. He has challenged their fidelity to a biblical worldview, and they have challenged his commitment to the liberal arts. "When he accuses us of not buying into the vision of the college, we have to scratch our heads," said M. Todd Bates, an assistant professor of rhetoric, who is leaving after this semester. "We came here because of the vision. The question is: What has happened to that vision?"

Saint in Hell?

It began with Augustine. There were already simmering tensions between some professors and the president -- over both academic freedom and the way the college disciplines students -- but the bishop of Hippo became the tipping point.

Augustine's pursuit of truth was the topic of a campuswide lecture delivered last fall by Mr. Bates. The lecture was part of a new tradition at Patrick Henry. The idea was that each fall a professor would deliver

a lecture and then, in the spring, a guest speaker would talk on the same topic. Classes were canceled that day so all students could attend. It was designed to bring the campus together.

It led, instead, to a deep division. When Mr. Farris, the president, saw the text of Mr. Bates's lecture the day before it was given, he was not pleased.

And when Mr. Farris is not pleased, he is not afraid to let people know.

Before starting Patrick Henry, Mr. Farris was president of the Home School Legal Defense Association, which he founded in 1983. He is 54 years old, though he could pass for 44 ("I have young hair," he says). He is a constitutional lawyer and an ordained minister.

Patrick Henry is an hour outside Washington, in the town of Purcellville, Va., population 3,500. Its small campus feels empty: The main administration building faces a field where a 106,000-square-foot student center is planned (a groundbreaking ceremony was held last week). Mr. Farris's second-floor office overlooks another field. There is, in other words, plenty of room for growth. The president has grand plans, along with high-profile backers like Tim LaHaye, co-author of *Left Behind*, the best-selling Christian book series, who can help make those plans happen.

There are still hurdles to be cleared -- accreditation among them. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools rejected Patrick Henry's accreditation bid. The American Academy for Liberal Education first turned down the application. The college appealed, and later withdrew it. The college is now a candidate for accreditation with the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools.

The president is understandably proud of the college he started and enjoys talking about, for example, the larger library that's in the works, or the cafeteria overhaul. He seems to revel in the details. He also seems to know most of the students by name, greeting them as they pass in the hallway.

When he's not playing campus guide, Mr. Farris can be assertive and direct. In these moments, his courtroom experience becomes evident. Mr. Bates's lecture, according to Mr. Farris, did not sufficiently reflect the college's Christian mission. "The original version was 24 pages long, and it didn't mention the Bible," he says.

Mr. Farris says he simply asked Mr. Bates: "Can't we say something about the Bible?"

According to the professor and Paul Bonicelli, who was dean of academic affairs at the time, the president first threatened to cancel the lecture. He relented after certain changes and additions were made.

But a draft of the speech that Mr. Bates says is the original mentions "Scripture" in the second paragraph. Mr. Bates wrote how Christians can draw on "divine revelation" and encouraged students to become the kind of people who "may shape the culture to the glory of God." The professor sent the lecture to faculty members and administrators before he delivered it. Mr. Farris, he says, was the only person who objected.

Mr. Bates says he and another faculty member discussed the speech with the president for nearly two hours. During that discussion, according to Mr. Bates, Mr. Farris said he believed that Augustine was in hell. (Another faculty member says Mr. Farris told him the same thing.) Mr. Farris denies saying this, though he admits having reservations about the famous saint.

Many professors saw the president's interference as heavy-handed and worrisome. If a professor could be scolded and forced to alter a lecture on a well-known Christian figure, what would happen if a lecture were given on Machiavelli or Marx?

After the incident, nine professors, including Mr. Bates, reached an informal understanding. If one of them were reprimanded or dismissed unfairly, the others would come to his or her aid. There were no legally binding oaths, and nothing was written down -- "it's not like we signed anything in blood," as one professor put it -- but it was an agreement just the same.

The Lifeboat Example

Their pact was soon put to the test.

This semester, the father of a student wrote a letter to the president complaining about one of his daughter's professors. The professor, Erik S. Root, who teaches government and was among the nine, used what is sometimes called the "lifeboat example" in one of his classes. Mr. Root asked students to imagine that two people are clinging to an inner tube in the middle of the ocean. The inner tube can support only one of them, so someone has to let go. The example was part of a discussion on the state of nature. "What would Hobbes and Locke have to say about this?" Mr. Root asked the class.

One student answered by quoting John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

"That's great, but it's too simplistic," Mr. Root says he told her. "Can we flesh that out?"

The discussion continued, and the professor brought up other moral quandaries, like whether a soldier should fall on a grenade to save his comrades. The lifeboat example was mentioned in passing; it was not the central theme of the lecture.

But the father of the student who quoted the Bible happened to be sitting in on the class that day. He was not happy with the professor's response -- and he wrote the president a letter telling him so.

Mr. Farris was bothered by the allegations made in the letter. "That's troubling if he told her that was simplistic," he said. "If he did what was alleged, then he should not be back here next year."

For the record, Mr. Root is a Christian who believes that the Bible is the inspired, infallible word of God. He says he wasn't denigrating it or the student with his response. In this context, he argues, quoting the verse does not fully answer the question. He wanted to keep the discussion going -- and that is what he did.

Mr. Farris, through a dean, demanded an explanation. The professor insisted that the president's concerns be put in writing. Mr. Farris responded with a list of seven questions, only one of which dealt with the lifeboat example. The others were related to an article Mr. Root had written on -- who else? -- St. Augustine. But it was the lifeboat example that aroused the president's ire.

If Mr. Farris had simply asked for an explanation, according to Mr. Root, there would have been no problem. He would have gladly offered one. But Mr. Farris also informed the professor that he was withholding his contract for the following year until he received satisfactory answers to his questions (there is no tenure at Patrick Henry). In other words, his job was in danger.

'Stand on Principle'

When Mr. Bates heard about Mr. Root, he felt like he had been kicked in the chest. "We knew it could happen to any of us," he said. "So when it did happen, it confirmed that uneasiness."

Four of the professors who agreed to the pact, including Mr. Bates, followed through. It was not a decision any of them took lightly. For starters, they all believed in the Patrick Henry vision and wanted to

be part of making it a reality. There were also practical considerations. "When you have a family and a mortgage, it's a serious decision," said David C. Noe, an assistant professor of classics and one of the four. "I have to put food on the table." Still, the professors concluded that a promise was a promise. If Mr. Root's contract was being withheld, then they would decline to sign theirs.

Mr. Noe calls it a "question of honor." Mr. Bates sees it in similar terms: "I had to come home and be able to look my kids in the eyes," he said, "and let them know that they have a dad they can respect, who will stand on principle."

The five men are not just colleagues, but good friends. All except Mr. Root have young children, and their families know one another and regularly get together. Even when discussing the controversy, which has been painful for all of them, there is laughter and good-natured ribbing. They were close before, and recent events seem to have brought them closer.

The president, for his part, says he is "baffled" by the professors' decisions.

But what happened to Mr. Root seemed, to them, like simply the latest outrage, further proof that the president had little respect for them or genuine academic inquiry.

Around that time, Mr. Noe and J. Kevin Culberson, an assistant professor of history and literature who is also among the four, wrote an [article](#) for the college's student magazine. The article was a "line in the sand," according to Mr. Noe. In it he and Mr. Culberson argued against the idea that "the Bible is the only source of truth." There is, they wrote, "much wisdom to be gained from Parmenides and Plato, as well as Machiavelli and Marx."

The article says that while the Bible contains "everything we need to know for reconciliation with God," it does not tell us "how to fix a door jamb or file a brief in appellate court." In other words, there is value in books other than the Bible. What's more, they argued, Christians have an obligation to seek out truth wherever it may be found.

This 900-word article prompted a 2,600-word response from the college's chaplain that was officially endorsed by the president. The lengthy [rebuttal](#), which was sent via e-mail to professors and students, questions the value of reading Machiavelli. It also strongly implies that the professors' column violated the college's statement of biblical worldview.

When asked recently what he objects to, Mr. Farris scanned the article on his computer screen quietly for a few moments. He then wondered aloud whether it had been altered to remove the offending phrases. "I think it may have been edited," he said. "That would be an interesting story." After reviewing another copy of the article, this one provided by his secretary, he conceded that the online version had not been edited.

He pointed to a line that says, "Clearly there is no greater good than knowledge...."

That, he said, is contrary to the Bible.

Yet the rest of the sentence clarifies their intent: "... for without knowledge, there can be no use of any other gift which God imparts." The professors say the knowledge they wrote about includes knowledge of God. And what, they wonder, is so unbiblical about that?

The article also says that "the best place to find evidence of Providential handiwork is not in mountains, birdsong, and sunsets, but in the works of men."

Mr. Farris does not agree. "I don't think the musings of Dennis Rodman are superior to the beauty of Mount Rainier," he said. The professors, however, mentioned some of history's greatest thinkers, not a former professional basketball player best known for tattoos and dating Madonna.

Withholding His Blessing

The day after the article was published, the four professors and Mr. Root told the president they would be leaving the college. They also asked the president's permission to inform students of the reasons for their departures. Rumors flew around the tightly knit community. Some found expression in responses to a short item about the controversy that was posted on *The Chronicle's* [News Blog](#).

Some students wondered if the professors now rejected the college's statements of faith and biblical worldview.

The professors' faith in Christianity was questioned, too. In an interview with the student newspaper, the president seemed to doubt the professors' belief in the Bible. He later sent an e-mail message to the campus clarifying his comments by saying he believes "they have a sincere desire to honor the Bible as God's authoritative Word."

The professors wanted to clear the air. They say they all believe in the Bible and remain committed Christians. But they were worried that explaining to students why they were leaving might be cause for dismissal. All five men had several months left on their contracts and needed time to find other employment.

No answer was forthcoming. When asked why he declined to give that permission, Mr. Farris offered an analogy: "I have adult children," he said. "They can come to me for advice or blessing. If someone wants to ask for my blessing, that means I agree with them. If they ask for advice, I can tell them and they'll go do whatever they want."

In this analogy, the professors were seeking his blessing, which he was not willing to give.

Despite that lack of assurance, Robert Stacey, chairman of the government department and one of the four professors, read aloud the college's statements of faith and biblical worldview in one of his classes. He told students that if they thought he had been unfaithful to these statements, they should approach him personally. Or, if they felt he was beyond redemption, they should leave the classroom rather than sit under his instruction. He said he would not hold it against anyone who left. About 15 minutes later, one student left. Everyone else stayed.

When the president heard what Mr. Stacey had said, he fired him.

Mr. Farris explained that Mr. Stacey was "forcing students to leave the classroom if they disagreed with him." He mentioned the student who left the class. "What's that girl supposed to do?" he asked.

'Foolishness With God'

Several students interviewed by *The Chronicle*, like Shant Boyajian, a junior government and public-policy major, believe the professors were treated unfairly. "I think the professors made a courageous stand in the face of an injustice that was done against them," he said.

Not all students feel that way. Jeremiah Lorrig, a senior government major, believes that it is better for the professors to leave because they weren't doing what the president asked of them. "If I work at McDonald's, I should want to sell hamburgers," he said. "If I want to sell tacos, I shouldn't work there."

Another student, who asked to remain anonymous because he fears retaliation, summed it up this way: "The professors believe there is truth to be obtained from Plato and Aristotle. While Dr. Farris would in theory advocate reading Nietzsche, he doesn't actually see the liberal arts as a good way to find truth."

Mr. Farris said he does value works other than the Bible. He teaches a course on the Constitution and pointed out that he rarely quotes the Bible in there. "I'm the one who started the college, and I'm the one who articulated the vision," he said. "What I don't think is that we take the Greek philosophers and swallow it whole. I believe what the Scripture said, and that is that the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."

After this semester, Mr. Farris will become chancellor, and Graham Walker, who was formerly vice president for academic affairs at Oklahoma Wesleyan University, will become Patrick Henry's second president. Mr. Farris wonders why, if he is stepping aside, the professors still decided to leave. "If I'm the problem -- well, I'm going to be gone," he said.

The professors say they doubt that Mr. Farris would ever relinquish control of the college, regardless of his title. "Besides," said Mr. Noe, "it wouldn't right past wrongs."

Mr. Bonicelli, the former academic-affairs dean, was there when the college began and helped write the statements of faith and biblical worldview. He believes that the president is not truly committed to the liberal arts. Mr. Bonicelli, who left what he calls his "dream job" because of disagreements with how Mr. Farris ran the college, called the firing of Mr. Stacey "absurd" and said that comments Mr. Farris has made about the value of reading Augustine and Plato were "horrific."

He also believes that the college -- which has gotten so much attention during its brief existence -- will never be the same after the professors' departures. "I think the trajectory now is that it will become a Bible college of sorts, not an excellent Christian liberal-arts college," he said. "The college as we created it -- I don't think that can be saved."