

A photograph of a band performing on a stage. The backdrop is a large world map. The lyrics "Send us to the nations To the broken" are projected on the map. The band consists of a keyboardist, two guitarists, a drummer, and a bassist. The stage is lit with blue and red spotlights. The audience is visible in the foreground.

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# CHAPEL

## THE HEARTBEAT OF CAMPUS

BY THOMAS WHITE



Chapel. The word sparks vastly different emotions.

For some, the first word that comes to mind is “skip.” For most Cedarville alumni, *Christ Is All I Need*, “Have an awesome day in Christ,” or another oft-repeated phrase may come to mind. At Cedarville, chapel is synonymous with “the heartbeat of campus” and in this article, I hope to show you why.

If you sat through four years of chapel at Cedarville, you probably already understand. If you haven’t, you probably think we’re crazy. Chapel five days a week? Why? Who wants to listen to that much preaching?

## COMMUNITY

Chapel forms a common bond amongst our Cedarville family. We all hear the same inspiring testimony, experience the Spirit moving mightily through a song, feel encouraged by thousands of voices singing in unison with hands raised high, and undergo genuine life transformation through the power of the Word passionately preached. This shared experience bonds our campus together like nothing else. It creates community. It sparks conversation. It unites us. It reminds us why we’re here. Chapel provides one place — dare I say, the central place — where God works and moves in the hearts and minds of our campus, changing wrong thoughts, convicting us of sin, encouraging the broken-hearted, and calling many to be saved or to their life’s work.

## KEEPING THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING

Many universities lost their way so long ago, they can no longer see the path and wander aimlessly in the wilderness. Harvard University, for example, once had chapel twice a day. The list of wayward schools founded by Christian organizations or with the intentions of training ministers is too numerous to list. Even amongst

those who call themselves “Christian universities,” the signs of compromise appear as obvious as the handwriting on the wall in Daniel.

Chapel certainly doesn’t ensure that a school won’t lose its way, but it does provide a safeguard against it. Think about it. You take the best hour of the day for classes: 10 a.m. — not too early but early enough. Instead of maximizing classroom usage, hold chapel during that hour five days of the week. Consider the expense. The Dixon Ministry Center cost \$15 million to build in 1996. For some schools, space matters as much as the money. A landlocked campus with a growing number of students simply can’t meet all together. The challenges are real. So when an institution commits millions of dollars to build a large structure in a central location to function maximally for one hour a day, it reminds everyone to keep the main thing, the main thing.

Educational institutions can very easily begin to think they exist to communicate a set of facts to recipients who pay money for the conveyance of information. If that’s all a school does, then it will soon be replaced by Google. A genuine Christian university exists to transform lives for godly service and vocational distinction.

For chapel to work properly, the President must own it in importance and messaging. Chapel provides a central opportunity to cast vision and unite a campus around a common goal. If the President of the institution doesn’t place the proper emphasis on chapel, then neither will the faculty or staff. If campus leaders don’t, neither will the students. Chapel will become just another requirement.

I recently eavesdropped on a tour guide at another Christian university. He told potential students that they offered chapel five days a week, about 100 services a year. My heart was encouraged ... momentarily. Next the guide said, “But don’t worry, you only have to go to 12 a semester, and you can count some outside events, too.” He continued, “It’s not hard to meet the



requirement.” Chapel must be more than a requirement: It must be a respite for our souls. Chapel should be a spiritually refreshing time of nourishment. A time where intellectually gifted people gather to corporately confess in humility that we desperately need Jesus.

Anything done in the name of Christ must be done with excellence. This especially applies to chapel. A highly passionate team uses its gifts to prepare inspirational opportunities for students to encounter God.

## FALL BIBLE CONFERENCE AND MISSIONS CONFERENCE

We begin each semester with a focused time of worship. The academic year begins with Fall Bible Conference. We invite incredible Bible teachers who are passionate about the Gospel to speak to our students during morning and evening sessions during the first four days of the academic year. This time together helps our students center their lives on Christ to prepare for spiritual growth throughout the semester.

We use this time together to present the Gospel and offer an invitation. Even though all students write out their testimony as part of their admissions application, we regularly see 30 or more students confess Christ during Fall Bible Conference, and one year the number was in the 70s. The excitement of seeing God move creates contagious momentum, propelling us into the semester.

The students break for Christmas and then return at the beginning of the calendar year. We take this opportunity to host more than 100 missionaries representing about 50 different agencies to challenge our students to consider how they can be on mission for God in their given vocation. This time together also allows us to recalibrate our lives as we seek to make the most of the spring semester.

Fall Bible Conference and Missions Conference implement our motto, “for the Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus Christ,” by focusing our attention on Scripture and the Great Commission.

## WORSHIP THROUGH MUSIC

There are times when we deviate from the norm for the sake of variety or when we intentionally showcase the talents of our students during chapel. Yet typically when we come together, you can count on the focus being congregational



singing that focuses our attention on God. We try to follow these rules:

1. Our music must be theologically accurate.
2. God must be the focus of worship — vertical rather than horizontal worship.
3. For the congregation to sing well, we must be able to hear ourselves and have songs that we can sing.
4. We recognize that the Word is central and use the music to prepare hearts to hear the Word preached.

We have incredibly talented musicians who lead with excellence and understand the necessity of focusing all the attention toward God and not toward earthly talents.

## WORSHIP THROUGH THE WORD

We desire text-driven messages in chapel. We want the preacher to study the Word so that he understands it well. Then he should peel the orange, exposing the juicy fruit of the Word as the audience enjoys its sweetness. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 teaches that God inspired His Word, and 2 Timothy 4:2 gives us the proper application of this truth as Paul writes, “Preach the word.”

The Word must be our focus. No matter how creative we try to be, no one can say it better than God. No matter how

passionate, no one can communicate more effectively than the Spirit applying the words He inspired. Illustrations and stories may tug at our emotions, but only God's Word will change our hearts. A text-driven preacher trusts the Word to do its work and tries not to get in its way. He then illustrates and applies the Word to the listener with a passionate appeal for spiritual growth.

## FITNESS LEVEL

This past summer, I went in for my yearly physical. They placed sensors on my chest and then put me on a treadmill and slowly began to increase the speed and elevation. In order to check my health, they needed to make sure that my heart worked well and that my recovery time fell within normal ranges. In my younger years, I thoroughly enjoyed lifting weights, but I generally hated cardio. I learned that

it's possible to present the appearance of being in good shape on the outside while failing where it matters most — this especially holds true when it comes to Christian colleges and universities.

If you want to test the fitness level of a Christian school, go to chapel. You'll find that some have already flatlined, while others have a hard-to-detect pulse, but the healthiest will have a strong heartbeat, revealing the vibrant spiritual nature of the campus community.

Hopefully, you now understand why we say chapel is the heartbeat of Cedarville University.

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**Thomas White** became Cedarville's 10th President in 2013. He earned his Ph.D. in systematic theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the author and editor of numerous publications, including *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Freedom* (B&H Academic).



## THE GRAVITY OF THE MOMENT

The music fades, the lights brighten, one foot in front of the other up each stair, and I slowly turn.

More than 6,000 eyes stare back at me. These eyes relay information to more than 3,000 minds, with more watching online. I frequently find myself scanning the audience. While most of our students listen and take notes, I'll see that one. The one with arms crossed, a hollow, disinterested gaze revealing a glimpse of a soul in shambles. That's the one. The one my heart longs to connect with and the one I pray for God's Spirit to reach.

But how? The hurt or doubt is real. My words are never well-crafted enough; my thoughts are always clearer in my own head than when I speak them out loud. My voice emerges with too thick of an accent to be intellectual and too little to be captivating. Often I stand despite the staggering weight of knowing that someone as flawed as I am isn't worthy to preach the Word. Surely there is someone better. I can do nothing to reach that one. Only God can do that. So I trust the Word to do its work.

The one represents someone's son or daughter, depressed, anxious about the future, darkened by sin, or perhaps resistant to the truth of the Gospel. Eternity hangs by the frayed thread of life on the precipice of disaster. So with all the passion my heart can muster, with the clearest words my intellect can form, and with every fiber of my being, I proclaim the eternal truth of the Gospel. Because God still changes lives, because the Spirit still draws sinners to the Savior, and because Jesus is King, chapel forms the pivot on which each of our students' 1,000 days turns.

The most intimidating, exhilarating, and terrifying moment arrives at 10 a.m. each weekday. Every genuine preacher feels the weight of the task before him, and I hope by reading this you, too, can sense the gravity of the moment. And I hope you will then join me in praying. Pray for the music, for the preacher, and, most importantly, for God to grant every student the ability to see clearly the truth of His Word. Pray that all 6,000 eyes will look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. But mostly pray that the Spirit will open the spiritual eyes of that one. The one who doesn't yet see.