Chapel: A Space Between Faith and Learning?

Ryan McIlhenny

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol47/iss1/3
Chapel: A Space Between Faith and Learning?

We have enshrined God in a chapel at the university campus and there He has to stay.
—Remkes Kooistra (1917-2005)
The University and Its Abolitions

During my undergraduate years, I was somewhat of a rebel without a real cause. I often got into trouble for doing things in which the gravity of such activities bore little weight on either the school or my own life. I suspect that like many young invincible undergraduates, I was testing the limits of my own social “misfitery,” which I never pushed too far and which I never understood as my reason for doing so. Looking back on those years with a modicum of chagrin, I’ve scolded my younger self for some of the not-so-noble (read puerile) things that I did. Yet, I’ll admit that there was at least one insubordinate activity for which I’ve remained proud. For a season, I was a chapel rebel—that’s right, a furtive rogue against forced piety. I was punished with the most benign and obnoxious form of punishment known to humanity: chapel probation. Forced into submission by administrators—those, ironically, with “student” and “life” attached to their titles—threatening my matriculation, I was compelled to attend every chapel for the remainder of my rebellious semester.

In the quotation prefacing this essay, Remkes Kooistra, speaking at the 1964 Unionville Conference sponsored by the Association for Reformed Scientific Studies (ARSS), an organization that would later help in creating the Institute for Christian Studies, highlighted the fact that a symptom of the secularization of institutions of higher education was not only the rejection of humanity’s central religious drive but also the act of isolating God to a specific place on campus. The urgency to unite faith and learning was a passionate cause taken up by evangelicals over the last four decades, but now that those particular culture wars have come to a close, the exigency of maintaining vigilance over faith and learning has waned considerably. Leaders at evangelical institutions have started to ask, writes Duane Litfin, “whether we may be losing our grasp on what this venerable slogan was designed to convey.”

Ryan C. McIlhenny, PhD, is associate professor of liberal arts at Geneva College (Shanghai). His recent book is Reforming the Liberal Arts.
While my cynicism has dulled just a bit in the nearly two decades working in Christian higher education, my criticism of chapel programs, mandatory or not, has sharpened. Please understand: I have attended many chapels as both spectator and speaker and have enjoyed quite a few. But it is not what goes on in chapel that concerns me, though I have witnessed more than enough strange occurrences that have conflicted with my Neo-Calvinist sentiments. Rather, I want to challenge the assumptions behind the habits that we’ve made for ourselves over the last four decades in relation to chapel. What I and many other faculty members are wary of is the way in which chapel—according to Thomas Kurian and Mark Lamport, editors of *Encyclopedia of Christian Education*—has become the most visible symbol of faith on campus. Many schools contrast and inadvertently separate academic excellence from the “spiritual formation” that goes on in chapel, the “cornerstone of Spiritual formation,” as described by staff members at two leading evangelical universities. To a significant degree, faith has remained in the space and time of the chapel program. Why else would schools refer to it as the “most visible symbol” of an institution’s faith commitment (not as visible as the classroom)?

**Learning without Faith is Dead**

“Few themes,” writes William Ringenberg, “have received greater emphasis in Christian colleges after 1970 than the integration of faith and learning.” Integration is a good term when used appropriately. Students are asked daily to analyze (to break apart) and synthesize (put back together), the latter of which relates to integrating (or reintegrating). For V. James Mannoia Jr., “integration presupposes that things not necessarily together are brought together: multiple disciplines, theory and practice, values and learning.” In this light, the word is fine. In analyzing water, for instance, chemists will distinguish the parts but will never drive a wedge between those components of water and water itself. Such a dichotomy is laughably incoherent. The process of making new disciplines, for instance, has intensified the challenge of dis-integration, requiring an active mind to maintain unity between subjects. The separation of faith and learning can be traced back to a pre-modern worldview, whereas the differentiation of disciplines is a relatively recent phenomenon of the last century and a half. The fracturing of the educational experience was not solely the result of the Enlightenment project, but also the result of habits created by modes of capitalism, which tends to split life into distinct units of production, compounding the contemporary mind’s hostility to wholistic thinking and living. Aware of such a tendency, many educators and have looked to the liberal arts to find ways to conceive of a curricular plan that provides a unified or holistic experience from the plurality of creation-revelation disciplines. A Christ-centered liberal arts education would benefit, as I have argued elsewhere, from an applied understanding of sphere sovereignty (differentiated disciplines in the unfolding of creation) and sphere universality (a coherence among disciplines in the transcendental work of the Holy Spirit in creation). A conscious interdisciplinary approach to learning is a healthier means of drawing together on a scientific level the diversity of creation.

The problem with the language of integration, as a larger philosophical issue, is that it gives the impression that faith and learning can stand apart from one another. According to Duane Litfin, “Integration is unfortunate. It appears to suggest an exercise in forcing together disparate things.” Integration seems to be that awkward—if not unduly time-consuming—task of
actively pulling together (and keeping together) two things that would repel one another if left alone. A few years ago, I watched a professor at one of the largest Christian universities in North America demonstrate the integrationist approach in front of a large audience. His right hand held out faith, while his left held out learning. As he slowly brought both hands together, the professor spoke as if the Christian university, especially his own, needed to be the mediator of the assumed tension between the two. The job of the university, he stated, was to hold the two together.

As a healthy working heart is to the body, faith is to learning. When it comes to this larger question of the relationship between faith and learning, I prefer integral over integration: faith is integral to learning. What exactly does this mean? Faith is more than a passive guide that accompanies or comes along side learning; rather, it is the central engine that drives not just learning but all of life. Faith is a resting and trusting in “something” that brings meaningful coherence to our world, a coherence that is concurrently the source of liberation—of redemption. According to the great polymath Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), faith is “the most fundamental law through which all higher differentiation in our consciousness can come about.” Kooistra’s lectures at Unionville relied heavily on the Educational Creed of the ARSS, which states that “human life in its entirety is religion. Consequently, scholarly study unfolds itself as service either of the one true God or of an idol.” We should not take the religious drive as blind faith, a faith that lacks certainty. Indeed, the kind of faith described in Scripture is one of confidence of things unseen. If all of life is driven by faith, then there is no learning and no knowledge without faith of some kind (faith in God and His word, faith in reason, faith in the individual mind, faith in the laws of physics, mathematics, or logic, etc.). Faith not only precedes learning but drives it.

Pro-Chapel Arguments

The tacit recognition of chapel as the capstone of an institution’s religious beliefs has been reinforced by a number of pro-chapel arguments. Allow me to list a few interrelated arguments that I’ve encountered in my career. The first is that such a program plays a central role in community building. The danger, however, comes when worship activities are directed toward ends not related to glorifying God and enjoying him, when the instruments of grace are used as a means toward a different institutional end. In my own observations of various chapel programs (and I have been to hundreds), the employment of the sacraments is most often done to recharge the college community, not for individual Christians to grow in their union with Christ. I have also witnessed contrived revival services organized for the sole purposes of purifying the college community. I once had the opportunity to attend such a gathering, a mandatory two-hour service, orchestrated by a college administrator. The purpose of the “revival,” I found out, was not to win souls but to purge the community’s drug and alcohol problems (a goal which failed miserably, I found out later). Using faith in such a way not only nullifies that faith but projects a false witness to those who seek integrity among religious leaders.

A second related argument is that such a program protects students from the secularism of the world. In this way, especially in the American political context, chapel is used as a redoubt for cultural warfare. Administrators and board members have defended chapel as a way to maintain the religious conservatism (cultural reactionism) of American evangelicalism. The college community gathers for the purposes of being reminded of who they are contra mundo. Without a chapel program, many argue, the college is in danger of descending into liberalism and secular humanism. Few students—and even fewer faculty members—have found such mild hysteria convincing, but it is nonetheless pushed ad nauseum by institutional leaders, many of whom remain in the culture-war trenches.

A third argument revolves around the fact that many schools are populated with students who are weak in their faith, or have very little experience in organized religion, or are not members of the Christian faith whatsoever. This, as well as the previous two arguments, raises the issue of the relationship between chapel and the institutional church. Even though most ad-
ministrators make a sharp distinction between chapel and church, many students ignore the qualification and make chapel their ecclesiastical fix. The church is the place where believers receive the ordinary means of grace. The operative word here, of course, is “ordinary.” Undoubtedly, the college community can be uplifted by the preaching of the word, which is not restricted to the confines of a local building or a particular time of the week. Non-Christian students can indeed be influenced by gospel ministry through a chapel program. But the unordinary should never obscure the ordinary. All students, Christian or otherwise, should be directed to the means of grace as instituted in the church and administered by the proper authorities. The Bible has given instruction as to how believers are to grow in the gracious work of sanctification, which is not restricted to a forced gathering—overtly or covertly—of people in a chapel program. A school should be careful to avoid interfering in the sovereignty of the ecclesial sphere and its meaning nucleus.

Finally, there is one argument that, quite honestly, has a significant amount of weight in cogency. This argument centers on the idea that chapel offers instruction for the development of the whole person. Here, chapel takes on the form of classroom instruction. Guest speakers act like academics as they break apart reality and put it back together, dissecting it from multiple perspectives and by way of multiple methods and reassembling it through these and other perspectives and methods. Students are likewise part of this process, but not merely as objective observers or static recipients; they too are broken down and put back together again. Chapel, like the classroom, can be just as transformative as the classroom.

Chapel as a Cultural Problem

Yet what’s missing from the above-mentioned arguments and others like them is a consideration of the ramifications of chapel as a cultural phenomenon. It’s not chapel as such but the current culture (or enculturation) of chapel that threatens the centrality of faith in learning. By creating something external to house the spiritual, unintentionally removing the faith-root from theoretical awareness, many institutions continue to act as if faith is presumably absent from portions of life and thus must be pulled back in. Addressing the challenge of incorporating faith in an age of secularism, chapel seems to have become the cohesive glue that holds faith and learning together. Yet, as this essay suggests, the cultural form of contemporary chapel has officiously stood as a major impediment in the relationship between faith and learning. It has become a cultural space between the two.

How does such a program do this? The answer requires a brief description of the dynamics of our cultural activities. Cultural production depends on language, time, and space—core cultural tenets that tend to be quite slippery in relation to meaning. Let’s begin with language, the most basic feature of culture. Much has been written on language and culture, but there is one critical feature that is important to this essay. We can agree that an arbitrary relationship exists between a sign and the “thing” it signifies. But quite often a sign, though attached to a “thing,” may not connect with the dynamics of the real. Multiple meanings can be produced between the signifier and the signified that betray any intellectual control that the culture producer (i.e., the human agent) may think he or she has over the cultural item. Language shapes both our pre-theoretical and theoretical knowledge of reality, but what we know about the world can be changed—in some cases, should be changed. A change in our knowledge comes, in part, by a historical change in language. The idea that knowledge is linguistically and historically contingent, however, should not lead us to relativism. (Truth is always relative, always situated in a context, but not relativistic.) Language and reality are often
misaligned, a condition that, in turn, speaks to the directional openness of cultural production. Despite the current enthusiasm over the role of cultural habits (i.e., liturgies) in cultivating our deepest loves, evangelicals have missed the fact that they cannot have absolute control over the direction of culture.

Chapel, the very name itself, automatically (and subconsciously) makes a distinction between sacred and “less”-sacred activities on the college campus. No matter how much institutional leaders may say that chapel is no less sacred than what goes on in the classroom, dormitory, cafeteria, or the field and the court, our cultural habits—in this case produced by our social spaces—believe such intellectual qualifications. I can remember the many times when students chose chapel attendance over that of classroom attendance. Most of the time the students said that they “had to” skip class because they needed to complete an assignment or cram for an exam. I often asked students that if they had to choose between one or the other why not skip chapel instead of class. The common reaction from students to my wager was one of arrested horror, as if I was telling students to either come to class or offer a sacrifice to Lucifer. When I proposed such a course of action to a particular student, the student responded by saying slowly and deliberately “Because…it’s chapel.” “What do you mean?” I asked. “Dr. Mac,” the student continued, “Do you think I should go to class or worship God?”

Second, along with rhetoric, time is inextricably connected to culture. In relation to culture making, I’m using time in its most basic sense: the meaning attached to habits that come by mere duration. Habits provide familiarity; familiarity eventually allows us to attach meaning to our habits (i.e., why we do what we do). Time, in other words, delineates our cultural habits. Whatever we may call it, chapel prepares the campus community for a segregated time of spiritual contemplation. This preparation is both physical and mental. Both our bodies and our minds become familiar with the habits that we instill in our daily lives. When such habits are broken, we feel uneasy, worried that our worldview coherence is being interrupted. We either seek to regain familiar habits or adjust to new ones, asking meaningful questions about self and life along the way. How has time contributed to the evangelical culture of chapel? In my experience, apologists see chapel as a break from the cerebral rigors of the classroom, a time to exercise the spirit and relax the mind. Stated differently, chapel “worship”—or at least a portion of it—is often a mindless activity, especially when speakers disparage head knowledge over heart knowledge, contributing to the scandalous anti-intellectualism that continues to plague the evangelical mind. The question is whether the habit of attending chapel in its current cultural manifestation is worth maintaining or whether it’s a “foolish consistency” that needs to be altered.

Third, rarely do we consider how physical space transforms culture. Consider the impact of the cultural consequences of a college’s spatial arrangement. One of the most important spaces on a campus is the administration building (or it’s the first that prospective students visit), creating a cultural reality that at the center of the institution is administrative authority. An administration building has evolved into the most important space, not so much for what it may (or may not) offer to the intellectual ethos of the community but rather by its mere locality at the center of campus. The disciplines within the humanities, arts, or sciences, whether ensconced within different schools or standing alone, are often housed in disconnected buildings, visited by prospective students as a kind of after-thought (if thought of at all). Each building on campus produces value in accordance with how it is viewed and how it is used. Some spaces, in this case building, are often given priority over others—as is the chapel building. The very existence of a separate church-looking chapel building or space compels the college or university community to leave the classroom to participate in worship exercises. A chapel program, with its sacred name, physical location (going to chapel and away from classroom instruction), and time schedule (usually between the end of morning classes and before lunch) creates a habit wherein the worship of God is done at a place and time distant from the cultivation of the mind. In this way, chapel
time can potentially take away from investing in the one place where faith and learning should be maximized—the classroom.

You Are How You Are Disciplined

Each tenet mentioned above becomes “culture” through human interaction with it. Allotted time, interaction with physical space, and use of tacitly accepted language all work together in a socially cumulative way to produce our cultural identity. This speaks to the last element in the production of culture: discipline. Many evangelicals have accepted the notion that our identity, a cultural phenomenon, is shaped by what we love. Love certainly plays an important part in who we are (or who we become), but we can also be shaped by what we may not love. Few of us have a great love for our patterned routines that shape our identity. We may be ambivalent toward the instrument of time that wakes us up in the morning, the means to get to our place of work (automobile, metro), and the daily interactions, including the language we use (an employee of “X” corporation), at the space that is our work (the business building). Even a dead-end job that we loathe shapes our cultural identity. There are some habits that we may not like, but we need to do them anyway (e.g., a diabetic who needs insulin injections). There are habits that we may think are impossible to break but can be broken nonetheless (e.g., addiction). And then, of course, there are more insidious habits that are forced upon us that shape our cultural identity: various yet integrated social, economic, and ideological relations that produce injustices in areas such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. We are all born into a context not of our own choosing. We inherit social and economic circumstances, accompanied by an array of liturgies, the moment we are born. I would contend that love is not the central drive of culture. Rather, discipline is.

Cultural habits are also associated with power or sovereignty—that which compels us not only to initiate but maintain our habits. These power bases, which are relations themselves, are not always clearly seen; they may be either latent or manifest. The late political scientist Sheldon Wolin illustrates the difference between latent and manifest totalitarianism in one of his last books, Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism. On the one hand, there is what he calls “overt totalitarianism,” wielded by a dictator that citizens can easily identify (putting a face to a name). On the other hand, there is what Wolin calls “inverted totalitarianism.” This relates to the “invisible hand” of power that has dictatorial sway over the citizens of a political entity. The modern multinational corporation is a prime example of this. It is impossible, according to Wolin, to identify a specific person or even persons in a corporation. The power of a corporation resides in part on the fact that it is both a legal person and an anonymous entity, yet it is no less powerful—and possibly even more powerful—than an overt dictator.

I mention Wolin simply to illustrate how power is often hidden. Key to the present discussion is the question of what justifies power, latent or manifest. Citizens have come to abide by power structures, doing so with little no question about the source of such sovereignty. There are power structures that are legitimate and others that are not. It is legitimate for Christians to impose the disciplinary practices—practices justified by Scripture—on those that are followers of Christ. As a Christian, I myself submit to the authority of the one who instructs me to habitually love my neighbor. I am disciplined by that power—the Word of God. Other legitimate figures (e.g., parents, ministers, and teachers), furthermore, are called to train those under their care to live in accordance with the sphere that they are associated with. But then there is power that could be—and even should be—challenged, rearranged, or outright dismantled. Use of power that is overtly oppressive should be brought to light and resisted, as should similarly less-visible power structures.
that undergird everyday existence. Racism, for instance, is a cultural product based on our habitual social interaction with the material world, which tends to produce an ideology that eventually emerges at a level of consciousness that reinforces such relations, convincing members of society that these structures correspond to fixed reality: the notion that race (or another cultural phenomenon) is our ontologically static “essence.” The social, economic, and ideological are, in this case, the latent power structures that coerce us to live a certain type of life.

The question for this essay is not whether a school has legitimate authority to impose mandatory chapel attendance. (I don’t think it does.) Indeed, the issue of legitimizing the authority to discipline students for not attending chapel is moot: institutions have ignored the habits that have already instilled the discipline necessary to create a distinct culture. The campus community is already disciplined by chapel culture. A consequence of such ignorance is that the power undergirding the discipline is strengthened—as is, therefore, the culture. (The now-popular—if not overused—term hegemony should come to mind at this point.) Even voluntary chapel programs have a disciplinary aspect to which we subconsciously submit. I was once a part of an institution that had a “voluntary” attendance policy. There was no forced worship that would have enabled hypocritical or false piety. This was a good thing, I thought, but not so for administrators, who feared the culture that would be produced with the absence of bodies, especially among rebellious faculty members, from the time, space, and language of chapel. At one point, the president expressed concern over the scant number of faculty and staff members attending chapel, a seeming spiritual epidemic that needed immediate correction in his mind. On a particular day, he went down the main hall of the administration building: “There are no faculty or staff members in chapel! We’re sending the wrong message.” He began knocking on office doors with an urgency that would have made one believe that the apocalypse had just arrived. In the moment, I felt as if I were forsaking the gathering of the saints, that I was an agent of secularization, that I had somehow sullied my spirit by retaining my book and my pen. But such feelings quickly dissipated. I then asked what message we were in fact sending by not attending chapel. Was our absence indicative of the devaluing of faith or that of the worship of God? Were we threatening the religious commitments of the institution? The point that I’m trying to make is that even a voluntary program cannot function outside a disciplinary cultural context. Regardless of tactics used for mandatory or non-mandatory attendance, the culture has been crystalized on our campuses. Even if the pressures to attend chapel were eased, an institution’s commitment to faith and learning has remained in conflict.

This essay is not a call to end chapel (though I for one would not kick up a fuss if an institution moved in that direction). It is, however, a call to greater awareness of our disciplinary habits—specifically the source of discipline and the legitimate authority behind it—and the kind of culture that potentially threatens the biblical ground-motive at the heart of Christian education. Perhaps schools should consider changing the name of chapel, employing a moniker that reflects more directly the intellectual task of an academic institution and making it less “churchy” and more like “speaker events,” as is done in other schools. Perhaps, furthermore, organizers should prioritize faculty members as speakers who will introduce arguments within their own disciplines, doing so for students who may not attend their class or choose their major. An English professor who speaks on the benefits of British literature would not only offer insights into the relationship between faith and literature but also positively impact, say, an engineering student who would not think of spending much time on such things. A physicist and a theologian, a poet and an economist—any number of disciplinary combinations—may together engage a critical topic from their respective disciplines. And they shouldn’t make chapel mindless; instead, they should make it not only intellectually engaging but intellectually rigorous. Faculty speakers should not only make the community think but make them want to think.

But one practice that should end, I will hum-
bly submit, is disciplining students for failing to attend chapel. Voluntary chapel may not result in low attendance, but low (or even high) attendance is not necessarily a reflection of the faith-commitments of the individuals that make up the college community. I wish it were enough to say that undergraduate institutions that do, in fact, discipline students for the purposes of getting them to attend chapel go beyond the sovereignty of the educational sphere. (I’m baffled that schools have continued such practices.) In the end, we can spend time arguing about the importance of chapel and whether it should be mandatory or not. But such arguments will not settle the uneasiness that many of us have over such programs. The chapel mystique will continue its consistent nagging until institutions consider the implications of material culture.

Of course, needless traditions, no matter how lofty we may speak of them, may not be reason enough to get rid of them. There are plenty of benign disciplinary practices in our lives that may not have any social or spiritually redeemable value, but we do them anyway. This is fine. But the problem comes when such effete practices skew what could be a sharper understanding of reality. We should also be mindful of the ways in which such practices distract us from the central task of a creational sphere. Faith is central to all activities on the college campus. “There is not a square inch,” to borrow Kuyper’s well-worn phrase, of the Christian college “where Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’” A cafeteria, for instance, has become an important place in the life of residential colleges. Such a space allows for discussion, debate, and even entertainment, a place to grow as a community. It could also be used to give the gospel, to pray, to worship. The same could be said about drama performances or sporting events. Yet are students disciplined in a punitive sense for not fully utilizing these curricular performative spaces? I hope not. Chapel culture communicates the idea that there is more spirituality in some places than in others. Habits related to knowing God on a more intimate level should be no less present in an English 101 class, or any other class, than they are in chapel. Princeton’s Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921) said it best: “Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God?” As they are culturally “enshrined” today, segregated by time, space, and rhetoric, chapel programs have posed a serious challenge to the integration of faith and learning. If we believe strongly that faith is a central motive in learning (i.e., that the two cannot be separated), then we need to reexamine the ideas and habits that threaten the union of two.

Endnotes

3. Ibid., 308.
9. Benjamin Ginsberg, The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). Ginsberg provides a number of reasons as to why colleges and universities have been increasingly administratively driven: the significant growth of professional administrators with little to no academic experience; financial challenges that require immediate decisions; and the fact that administrators are able to control what is communicated to board members, positioning faculty members as consults and less as decision makers. 

Pro Rege—September 2018 23
makers. In short, educational institutions have taken on the form of the corporate ethos, where administrators have become managers, students consumers, and faculty members disposable labor.


12. By now the reader should notice that my critique centers on undergraduate chapel programs. A strong argument could be made in defense of seminary chapel programs. Students looking toward a career in full-time ministry, especially for the pastorate, are helped by participating in church-related exercises (e.g., giving a sermon to faculty and peers). Although informal and even contrived, chapel is critical for such specific training.

13. According to Christiancollegeguide.net, 92% of evangelical colleges and universities have mandatory chapel programs. Various methods are used to monitor student attendance. The most popular today is the card swiping system where students swipe their cards before and after a chapel service. Failing to attend chapel may result in a fine, probation (whatever that means), or suspension.