

11-20-2017

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J. Murray Murdoch

Cedarville University, murdochm@cedarville.edu

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Recommended Citation

Murdoch, J. Murray, "Providential: Only the Hand of God Can Explain Cedarville" (2017). *History and Government Faculty Publications*. 203.

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PROVIDENTIAL

ONLY THE HAND OF GOD CAN EXPLAIN CEDARVILLE

BY MURRAY MURDOCH

For the “old-timers” at Cedarville, there is a phrase oft-uttered that is undeniably true: “The only way to explain Cedarville is God.” From the countless illustrations of this truth, let me reflect on just a few.

When descendants of America’s Scotch/Irish immigrants settled in the Ohio Valley, they organized a church congregation and formed a General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. In the 1880s, the Synod leaders determined to establish a college to educate pastors and teachers for their denomination’s youth. A committee of five men began searching for a location in the Cedarville area. Corporation papers were drafted and the state of Ohio granted a charter on January 26, 1887.

The trustees purchased property in May 1888. On May 10, they reported \$9,729.35 had been pledged to the school, but the treasury had received only \$549. Over the next two years, efforts to raise funds failed, and finally, in a spirit of despair, the trustees concluded that “the whole enterprise be abandoned.”¹ However, the Synod rejected the resolution, and Cedarville College survived in name only.

Then, on May 24, 1892, the treasury reported that the college had received a \$25,000 bequest from the estate of William Gibson. According to Cedarville’s archivist Lynn Brock ’68, the Gibson gift, a total surprise, today would be worth \$650,000. An advertising campaign was immediately

launched, and on September 19, 1894, the first students entered Cedarville.

Through the years the college remained small, but effective, in training pastors and educators for the Presbyterian Synod. But, in the early decades of the 20th century, the college continued to be financially strapped. By the 1920s, the trustees began considering support from the much larger Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination. Cedarville would need to separate from the tiny (13 churches) Reformed Presbyterian Synod for this to happen.

The Reformed Presbyterians, recognizing their inability to provide financial help, released the college, and Cedarville immediately petitioned the Presbyterian Church (USA), but was rejected! With no supporting church body, Cedarville became a private entity owned solely by its Board of Trustees. It was a Christian school without a church or constituency. The trustees became a self-perpetuating board, completely responsible for the assets and liabilities of the college.

Soon America was caught in the Great Depression, which was devastating for small institutions. Then World War II took young people from the halls of colleges to the battlefields

of Europe and the Pacific. Every avenue for survival was explored, but none bore fruit.

The headline in the *Columbus Sunday Dispatch* on February 1, 1953, was heart-wrenching: "Sentiment won't keep the doors open." The article quoted Harold Kennedy, identified as "acting head" of Cedarville College, as saying, "Unless you believe in miracles, I'm afraid we will have to shut down."

The Cedarville dilemma was shared by a deacon with his pastor, James T. Jeremiah, who was also a board member of the Baptist Bible Institute (BBI) of Cleveland. BBI was primarily a night school that wanted to expand, but found it extremely difficult to acquire property in the Western Reserve area of Cleveland. Jeremiah convinced the BBI trustees to come to Cedarville and explore the concept of a merger.

What the BBI representatives heard from the Cedarville trustees was amazing. The Cedarville men wanted the institution to remain a college of higher learning and continue under its original name and charter, and they wanted the BBI leaders to assume responsibility for any remaining debts (and assets) of the school at the close of 1953. In addition, the BBI board agreed that Cedarville would remain a liberal arts college.

The Presbyterian trustees stated that if BBI would continue Cedarville as a Christian college, they would give them the campus. This would be achieved by half of the Presbyterian trustees resigning and the other half electing Baptist trustees. Then the remaining Presbyterians would resign, and the Baptists would elect the rest of their brothers. Thus in 1953, by the simple process of resignation and election, Cedarville became a Baptist liberal arts college. Ultimately, the money owed the college was collected, which paid the balance of the debt assumed. As one of those early BBI trustees stated in the *Ohio Independent Baptist* magazine in May 1953: "This thing is too wonderful and too good to be of any source other than God." In response, the 1953 student body joyfully named its yearbook *The Miracle*.

The face of the Lord continued to shine on Cedarville. When I began in 1965, the number of faculty and staff nearly matched the student body. Today the number of students is approaching 4,000. Cedarville University first achieved accreditation with North Central Association of Colleges

and Schools in 1975. That initial accreditation occurred in the midst of criticism from both Bible believers and secular humanists. The criticism came in letters and articles, as well as from the pulpits of churches and Christian colleges. Many in the church believed accreditation could not take place without compromising the Word of God. This was dispelled when a member of the accreditation team asked Jeremiah what would happen if a faculty member denied the doctrinal statement. Jeremiah's response? "We would fire him." The accreditors agreed that, given Cedarville's mission, that was exactly what should happen!

The secular humanist barrage continues today, but Cedarville has maintained accreditation without compromise in each subsequent reaccreditation examination that has occurred, including 2016 when the examiners' conclusion stated:

"Cedarville University is a university that is deeply committed to its mission ... Students experience both high quality academics and spiritual growth ... All aspects of the institution are driven by the mission. Cedarville faculty, staff, and students stand for the Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus Christ."

In today's secular educational system, only God can accomplish this.

One final example of God's providential hand, and perhaps the most important of all: I have seen what God has done in the

lives of young men and women on this campus in every one of the 52 years I have been privileged to be a part of this community. Every single year, we have the joy of seeing young people accept Christ as personal Savior, as the Spirit of God penetrates with convicting and saving power. Others commit their lives to ministry in a variety of areas.

This certainly affirms that the old-timers are correct: The only way to explain Cedarville University is God. I pray that stays true for the remainder of this beloved institution's days.

1. *Minutes, Board of Trustees, May 26, 1890.*



The Board of Trustees from the Baptist Bible Institute in Cleveland, Ohio

Murray Murdoch is Senior Professor of History and former Chair of the Department of History. He earned his Ph.D. from Northwestern University. He has authored two histories of Cedarville University, *Cedarville College: A Century of Commitment (1987)* and *Cedarville University: Inspiring Greatness for 125 Years (2012)*. He has served at Cedarville since 1965.