

**“The Mega-Church Mistake”
(And Its Implications for Christian Education)**

(NB: this is a work in progress and will be revised in the future)

“We made a mistake.”¹ In quoting and agreeing with these words of executive pastor Greg Hawkins of the Willow Creek Community Church, Bill Hybels, the well-known pastor of this well-known mega-church in suburban Chicago (South Barrington, Illinois) was humbly acknowledging what he referred to as “the wake up call” of his adult life. In an address last summer at the Willow Creek Association’s Leadership Summit, he referred to data obtained from an intensive self-study of the members of the Willow Creek Community Church (WCCC) which called into question its spiritual effectiveness in making Christian disciples. Their survey results showed that some 25% of more mature believers were either “stalled” in their Christian lives or felt “dissatisfied” with their church (p. 47), and that some 63% of this group were thinking of leaving WCCC for greener pastures (p. 53). On the basis of this internal evaluation, later expanded to include five additional churches, Hybels and his staff discovered much to their amazement that *attendance* at well-planned church activities and participation in well-developed ministry programs did not automatically result in spiritual growth and Christian

¹ This quote and the content below are taken from the Willow Creek Community Church’s “Reveal” website: <http://www.revealnow.com/>. Accessed January 18, 2008. Page numbers in parentheses indicate where the same ideas are presented in their book titled *Reveal: Where Are You?* that presents the findings of Willow Creek’s self-study and its proposals in response. Indeed, when Hybels presented a new strategic plan to his congregation for renewed emphasis on spiritual growth and discipleship in April 2007, he himself did say, “We have been wrong. We need to rethink the coaching we give you as your pursue your spiritual growth” (p. 64).

devotion, understood in terms of an increasing love for God and love for other people (p. 29).

Given that Hybels pastors one of the largest churches in America and that his model of ministry has been duplicated countless times through the influence of the Willow Creek Association, we can understand why these findings for him were “mind blowing,” “earth shaking,” “ground breaking,” and induced many a sleepless night. As he put it, the conclusions from the self-study “rocked” his world (and the world of his church staff as well, p. 63). Despite huge investments of financial and human resources into a variety of Willow Creek programs, Hybels admitted that “when the data actually came back[,] it wasn’t helping people that much. Other things that we didn’t put that much money into and didn’t put much staff against is stuff our people are crying out for.” His public confession and statement about “what we should have done differently” took the following form.

We made a mistake [again, quoting Hawkins]. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and become Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become ‘self feeders.’ We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their Bibles ..., how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.²

² Greg Hawkins describes what I am calling the “mega-church mistake” in his book *Reveal* in these words: “We went in [to the self-study] with some ‘blindness’ on, believing that church activities were the predominant drivers of spiritual growth, and we just assumed the church would show up as the central force in the spiritual walk of our most Christ-centered people. We were not prepared to discover that so many people were *stalled* in their spiritual lives, and certainly not prepared to find that some of our best disciples were among those most *dissatisfied* with the church. We were also surprised that personal spiritual practices played such a critical role — show up as the primary catalyst for growth in the most advanced spiritual segments” (p. 58, italics added).

This troubling Willow Creek revelation called for nothing less than an entire paradigm shift in church ministry according to Greg Hawkins, the executive pastor mentioned earlier (he was the one who actually generated the idea for this discipleship-efficiency study in the first place). “Our dream,” he states in a short video, “is that we fundamentally change the way we do church. That we take out a clean sheet of paper and we rethink all of our old assumptions. Replace it with new insights. Insights that are informed by research and rooted in Scripture. Our dream is really to discover what God is doing and how he’s asking us to transform this planet” (also see chapter four in *Reveal*).

Hybels himself, as indicated in the statement above and in other points he made in his Leadership Summit speech, has also called for alternative ways to “coach” people toward spiritual maturity. He has likewise proposed that each Willow Creek member, presumably old or new, be outfitted with a “customized spiritual growth plan,” not unlike personal plans for physical fitness that members get at local health clubs (pp. 65-66).

The entire story of Willow Creek’s mega-church mistake and what they are doing about it is contained in a 2007 book of 110 pages titled *Reveal: Where Are You?* (The page numbers cited above are from this book). Co-authored by Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, with a foreword by Bill Hybels and editorial contributions by Eric Arnson, the book wrestles with the basic question about how churches can know if they are making a difference in the ongoing spiritual lives of their people. In tracking, analyzing and applying over 2.6 million data points, the book offers an agenda for action in light of

the discoveries made about the less than stellar spiritual condition of many members of their church. As the book's website states, "REVEAL helps you understand what has been discovered through the research thus far. In addition, you'll gain a strong understanding of the science involved in identifying how individuals growing spiritually."

Overall, Willow Creek desires that all the churches in their Association (which has a global reach) do similar studies to determine the quality of their discipleship ministries. Some Baptists are following Willow Creek's example as well, calling for a fresh look at the strengths and weaknesses of their approaches to discipleship programs. See the cover story titled "Fully Devoted Followers?" of the January 7, 2008, *Baptist Standard*.³

To be sure, Christians in the blogosphere and elsewhere have been humming with criticisms and compliments ever since Hybels made these disclosures last year.⁴ Negatively, some have proclaimed

³ John Hall, "Time to revamp discipleship methods? Some experts say, 'Absolutely, yes,'" *Baptist Standard* 120, no. 1 (January 7, 2008), p. 8. Companion stories in this edition of the *Baptist Standard* included Ken Camp's article, "Raising the bar for membership creates culture of discipleship, some churches insist," and Adelle M. Banks, "Study finds limits to Willow Creek's success model," both on p. 9.

⁴ See "REVEAL Revisited: One sociologist says Willow Creek's research may not be as revealing as we think," at http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2008/01/reveal_revisit.html. Accessed January 19, 2008. Os Guinness — known to some rather negatively as a "professional curmudgeon," but to others as a Christian public intellectual and a shrewd and constructive cultural and ecclesiastical critic who prophetically speaks truth in love — has been concerned for sometime now about the dalliance of the church-growth movement with the assumptions of modernity and with its incessant quest for relevance. In 1993, Guinness published *Dining With the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts With Modernity* (Baker/Hour Glass Books) in which he wrote these line-in-the-sand words: "When all is said and done, the church-growth movement will stand or fall by one question. In implementing its vision of church growth, is the church of Christ primarily guided and shaped by its own character and calling — or by considerations and circumstances alien to itself? Or, to put the question differently, is the church of Christ a social reality truly shaped by a theological cause, namely the Word and Spirit of God?"

that Willow Creek's self-analysis has demonstrated once and for all that Hybel's mega-church philosophy of ministry is seriously defective and must be discarded. Others have said that the Willow Creek survey was technically flawed and seriously misinterpreted, concluding too much from too little. Positively, some have congratulated the Willow Creek staff for their courageous admission of their failures and are supporting them enthusiastically in their quest to find new ways of transforming believers into "sold out" followers of Jesus Christ.

Regardless of one's personal response to Willow Creek's alleged discipleship revelations and programmatic resolutions to correct the discrepancies, other studies as well as anecdotal evidence, like taking a good long look at our own lives, suggest that many of us who claim to be Christians fall short of the biblically based spiritual goals articulated by St. Paul of being mature believers and manifesting the measure of the stature that belongs to the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4: 13).⁵

In sum, what — in practice — is the church's decisive authority? ... If the church makes anything else the decisive principle of her existence, Christians risk living unauthorized lives of faith, exercising unauthorized ministries, and proclaiming an unauthorized gospel. Yet that is precisely the temptation modernity gives us." (p. 35). In 2003, Guinness also released a related volume titled *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* (Baker Books) which develops a thesis that stoutly challenges the church-growth movement: "By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant" (p. 15).

⁵ By "other studies," I have in mind Ronald J. Sider's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

Christian Education's Mistake?

If it seems rather naïve of the Willow Creek pastoral staff to think that their members' attendance at and participation in church activities and ministerial programs *automatically* translated into in-depth Christian discipleship, then could Christian faculty, staff and administrators be equally naïve in assuming that enrollment at one of their schools, colleges or universities translates *necessarily* into an intellectually formative, love and character-shaping, calling-generating, and in general, life and culture-changing experience for students? Students take our classes, go to chapel, participate in co-curricular or extra-curricular activities, and have other wide-ranging college experiences — in other words, they attend and participate in all our programs and activities — but to what end and with what impact? In other words, what do Christian educators and what does Christian education have to learn, if anything, from Willow Creek's mega-church mistake?⁶

For the pastors at Willow Creek, the central question concerns what fosters genuine Christian growth and discipleship. For Christian educators, the central question has to do with what induces student learning and transformation? Whether it's the church or the school, the questions that arise pertain to how people are formed as people and how they change. People are inevitably shaped into something. This is non-negotiable. The real questions, then, are into what are people shaped and how? How are mindsets formed and convictions

⁶ In another version of this paper, I am going to address "the worldview mistake" which is the faulty assumption that just because church members or Christian students have been taught a biblical worldview, or read books on this subject, that they will necessarily apply it across the board in every day life.

cultivated? How are loves rightly ordered and character fashioned? How are decisions made and actions chosen? How do people determine what they do with their bodies and, in general, with their lives? How do peoples' greatest goods become their greatest goods — whatever they may be — for which they vigorously live the entire course of their lives?

In responding to questions like these about the critical determinants of human character and conduct, Willow Creek wanted to know what were the “drivers” as well as the “barriers” to Christian growth and development (pp. 38, 90-91). On the one hand, Willow Creek recognized much to their surprise that the “drivers” that foster Christian formation were the classic spiritual practices and disciplines that they had unfortunately neglected in their philosophy of ministry.⁷ On the other hand, it seems to me that Willow Creek succumbed to a considerable amount of naiveté in their understanding of the significant “barriers” that frustrate the fulfillment of this noble end of Christian maturity.

Could it be that Christian educators and Christian education have fallen prey to the same error? It's quite possible! I would submit that neither pastors nor professors, neither our churches nor our schools, have given sufficient attention to the complex cultural dynamics that thwart love and loyalty to Jesus Christ but instead prompt affection and allegiance to competing power and authorities in their lives. What we have failed to recognize is that “When worshippers [or students] who have ingested the religion of

⁷ See footnote #2 above.

consumerism [or other idols] bring it unnamed and unrecognized into the place of worship [or the classroom], we have a radical conflict between two claims of ultimacy.”⁸ Oftentimes, consumerism or other idols win out, and God’s word is choked or obstructed in our lives. Because of this egregious failure to grasp why so many believers are rather easily conformed to the *Zeitgeist* or the spirit of the fallen age in disobedience to the commandment of non-conformity found in Romans 12: 2, it may be that our standard ecclesiastical and educational methods do not do very much to make a real difference in the lives of our parishioners or pupils. Therefore, we need to take a closer look at this major roadblock to Christian discipleship and student transformation — its causes and effects — and to do so with the help of the thought of a rather notorious, twentieth-century French philosopher who has carefully examined the knowledge and powers at play in forming human consciousness and directing human behavior. That infamous French thinker who will serve as my conversation partner in the rest of this paper is Michel Foucault (1926-1984).

Governmentality, Government and ‘Regimes of Practices’ and Disciplines

In February of 1978, Michel Foucault delivered a landmark lecture in French at the Collège de France with the title “Governmentality. ” By a long and winding road his groundbreaking address eventually made its way into an English translation a year

⁸ Michael Warren, quoted in Debra Dean Murphy, *Teaching That Transforms: Worship as the Heart of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), p. 117.

later in the independent English journal *Ideology and Consciousness* in 1979.⁹ Three years before this lecture in 1975, Foucault had published one of his most famous books titled *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and it, too, was subsequently translated into English in 1977.¹⁰ In these two works, Foucault explains the meaning of the concepts enumerated in the above heading — governmentality, government, regimes of practices and disciplines — and how they can help us understand the subtle yet sure manner in which our minds are formed, our character shaped, and our actions determined. My task here is to offer some rudimentary descriptions of these labyrinthine notions and to try to offer some helpful illustrations.

At first, we might think that Foucault has politics in mind by using words like “governmentality” or “government,” but this is not the case. Rather, he is drawing on the etymological meaning of the word “govern” which comes from Latin and Greek roots that originally meant “to steer.”¹¹ Thus for Foucault, these words refer, metaphorically, to the guidance and direction — or steering — of human conduct. In coining these terms, therefore, Foucault was concerned, not with “the” government, politically speaking, but with the *government* (i.e., steering) of human action, behaviorally

⁹ Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: SAGE Publications, 1999, reprinted 2003, 2004, 2006), p. 1.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (French original, 1975, reprint, New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1977).

¹¹ Govern comes from L. *gubernare* "to direct, rule, guide," originally "to steer," from Gk. *kybernan* "to steer or pilot a ship, direct." <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=govern&searchmode=none>. Accessed January 29, 2008.

speaking, and with the *governmentality*, intellectually speaking, that determines it. In other words, governmentality has to do with a particular (modern) mentality or mindset, and government is used to denote how human conduct can be calculated and directed under the jurisdiction of that (modern) mentality or mindset.¹² But let's press on to discuss these notions even further.

Governmentality. The “truths” we believe in about reality — about God, the universe, our world, human existence and nature — determine how we steer or govern ourselves and other people in terms of our conduct. Simultaneously, how we steer or govern ourselves in terms of our conduct gives birth to the many “truths” we believe about reality in its multiple dimensions. There is, therefore, a kind of reciprocity between truth and government and government and truth. Which comes first is hard, if not impossible, to say. In any case, what is most important is that a “governmentality” exists, that is, there is a knowledge base that determines how we think about behavior, both descriptively as it is and prescriptive as it ought to be. In short, governmentality is a mentality about government, regardless of whether that mentality generates or is generated by our conduct.

We need to point out several noteworthy traits about Foucault's notion of governmentality. First of all, how we think about human governing or government, ours or others, is not an individual but a collective matter, a style of thought held by a larger group of people. It is an historic bundle or body of knowledge, beliefs and opinions shaped over time in which we live, move and have our being.

¹² Dean, *Governmentality*, p. 2.

Second, because of our deep immersion in this aggregate body of knowledge, it is essentially invisible to us and we take it for granted. And for the most part our thought patterns remain unquestioned or uncriticized — “This is what I am this is what I do; I never thought of looking at things any other way.” (Wittgenstein). Third, governmentality as a way of understanding how ideas or truths exercise authority over us and others is not understood in the abstract but in the concrete. Governmentality is a form of knowledge that is embedded in our cultural products and social institutions in very practical ways, with an assist from the social sciences. The concepts that shape our minds, hearts and lives are not distanced from life but instead are woven into the very fabric of it.

That we should productively manage the national or global economy in this way or that illustrates a form of governmentality derived from specialists in the field; various dieting plans based on advice from “experts” employ alternative mentalities of self-government when it comes to the ways we eat and drink. Succinctly put, then, there is an intimate connection, perhaps even a cause/effect relationship, between how we think and how we live. As Proverbs 23: 7 states, “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” We are governed, in other words, by our governmentalities.

Government. Various mindsets or mentalities, according to Foucault, govern us and are responsible for conducting our conduct. The “conduct of conduct” is exactly what Foucault says government is, entailing an agency’s or an agents intentional attempt to shape our behaviors according to an acknowledged set of norms for a variety of different purposes. According to Mitchell Dean, “government is any

more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definite but shifting ends with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes.”¹³

In plainer words, there are an awful lot of people out there who believe that human behavior can be controlled and who want to tell us what to do and how to live our lives. Their strategies fit with our desires and our resulting choices seem rational, moral, and free. The proverbial bottom line is that governing authorities, whoever they may be, whether in economic, domestic, educational, ecclesiastical, professional, political, sexual or penal contexts, etc., are seeking to affect who we are and what we should do as persons. As Dean says, “... government is crucially concerned to modify ... the individual, its selfhood or personage, or the personality, character, capacities, levels of self-esteem and motivation the individual possesses.”¹⁴ The governors who govern us are, of course, themselves also governed, and all people — the governed and the governors alike — must also govern themselves in actions of the “self on self” (Foucault’s reconception of the nature of ethics). As interesting as an analysis of an ethics of self-government may be, what is most important for our purposes is discovering the ways and means by which people seek to conduct the conduct of others rather than in how they conduct

¹³ Foucault’s notion of government as the “conduct of conduct” is quoted in Dean, *Governmentality*, p. 10, and Dean’s definition of government cited here is on p. 11.

¹⁴ Dean, *Governmentality*, p. 12.

themselves. For it is by means of a set of organized but perhaps unrecognized practices — regimes of practices — through which we are governed, and by which we are fashioned into particular kinds of persons who do particular things with our bodies and our lives.

Regimes of practices. Certain forms of knowledge (governmentalities) dictate certain kinds of behavior (government), and on this basis we are habituated to behave in a certain way through various regimes of practices. While the specific phrase “regimes of practices” may sound disturbing, it does not necessarily carry a negative connotation (though it can). Regimes of practices are rituals of behavior by which we regularly live in the world, especially in institutional contexts. Dean defines them as “the more or less organized ways, at any given time and place, we think about, reform and practice such things as caring, administering, counseling, curing, punishing, educating, and so on.”¹⁵ Like the forms of knowledge they are based on, regimes of practices are frequently taken for granted and rarely questioned. Occasionally, however, our regimes of practices or our normal, everyday way of doing things will be “problematized,” especially as difficulties arise and we detect potential or actual trouble. “A problematization of government,” as Dean says, “is a calling into question of how we shape or direct our own and others’ conduct.”¹⁶ Should we perceive that “something is

¹⁵ Dean, *Governmentality*, p. 21.

rotten in the state of Denmark,”¹⁷ then it is high time to create the space necessary to ask some significant questions about how things are being done and to do some soul-searching or institutional criticism. This could and perhaps should result in the exposure of the weaknesses of these taken-for-granted regimes of practices. It may also entail a call for resistance to them, and bring about their necessary transformation, however hard such personal or institutional changes may be to face, much less to pull off.

Welcome to the fallout,
Welcome to resistance,
The tension is here,
The tension is here,
Between who you are and who you could be,
Between how it is and how it should be....¹⁸

As these poignant lyrics suggest, major differences in personal identities and social conditions are at stake in different regimes of practices. We can't afford to ignore them since they are, under a governmentality that influences the conduct of our conduct, making us who we are and determining the character of our culture. After all, we do live in what Foucault calls a “disciplinary society” whose primary goal is the formation of the person by the mechanisms of power within it.

¹⁶ Dean, *Governmentality*, p. 27. It may be helpful to point out that Willow Creek essentially problematized their discipleship methodology. They called into question how they were trying to shape the character and conduct of Christian disciples.

¹⁷ From "Hamlet," Act I, Scene 4.

¹⁸ Jon Foreman and Switchfoot, “Dare You To Move,” from the CD *A Beautiful Letdown*, Columbia/Sony 2003.

Discipline and Punish

As I mentioned earlier, Michel Foucault was a notorious French thinker, in fact, he was a libido-driven rebel, protesting social control and resisting cultural systems by revealing the mechanisms of domination in modern culture.¹⁹ Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish* was a watershed, postmodern work that used an in-depth study of the prison system to expose the coercion and corruption, not only in the criminal justice system, but also in political institutions, educational establishments, factories, hospitals, churches and in virtually limitless numbers of other organizations with which we have to do on a daily basis. As a result, Foucault's work, along with critical theory in general, aroused a deep suspicion of all kinds of institutions, of institutional power, and the ways they seek to control and manipulate us, most often without our awareness, thanks to our gullibility, naiveté, and general thoughtlessness.²⁰

At the heart of Foucault's critique of institutions is the notion of *power* because at the heart of institutions is power, especially in its

¹⁹ I am deriving much of the following analysis from James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), chapter 4, passim. Though it is probably accidental, films like "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" starring Jack Nicholson, and the HBO produced movie "Wit" with Emma Thompson present disturbing pictures of hospitals and the medical profession that illustrate Foucault's concern about systems of domination. In these films, actual mechanisms of power are masked with patronizing claims about care and concern for patients, when in fact the sick and needy are unwittingly subjected to the fallout of the knowledge games, power politics, personal problems, and sex lives of those who seemingly have their best interests at heart. Episodes of "Grey's Anatomy" and "The Practice" may disclose similar corruptions of loftier Hippocratic ideals.

²⁰ Critical theory is the presumably socially scientific and philosophic attempt to analyze and criticize society and social institutions, especially insofar as these establishments are frequently mechanisms of power, oppression and control (especially through ideas and/or economics, etc) with the goal of exposing such repression or coercion and injustice, and liberating those in thrall to maleficent social mores and organizations as a whole.

relationship with “knowledge,” so-called (Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche are in the background here). In Foucauldian terms, knowledge is not so much power, as Francis Bacon had decreed, but rather power is, in fact, “knowledge.” Knowledge is not objectively determined in some purely scientific way, thereby giving us legitimate power to control nature. Rather, the possession of power by various authorities in institutions generates what is falsely called “knowledge.” If the new, economic golden rule is that those who’ve got the gold, make the rules, then the new epistemic golden rule is similar: those who have the power create the “knowledge.” There is always a power/knowledge or knowledge/power relationship, and at the end of the day, what is assumed to be “knowledge” is but a mask for power that is normally used in the interest of the stronger party, that is, for the purposes, pleasures, and perpetuity of those in power. In Foucault’s terms, “We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”²¹

To understand the power/knowledge relationship, that is, to figure out how power has produced knowledge historically up to the present moment, Foucault developed and employed the methods of archaeology and genealogy (with a tip off from Nietzsche on this

²¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 27.

score). Archaeologically speaking, it was necessary to dig deep into the soil of history and of social institutions to understand how knowledge was and is not objective, scientific or innocent, but a function of power and self-interest. Genealogically speaking, it was necessary to trace the family history of a knowledge base, to see who gave it birth, what it produced in terms of offspring, its contributions, its legacies, right up to the present time. Genealogies and/or archaeologies of knowledge, or of epistemes, as Foucault also called them, were designed to show that deep, hidden, and powerful prejudices have contributed significantly into creating and shaping what people considered to be “true truth” or “genuine knowledge.” At the same time, these methods show how we have failed to recognize the human authorship, the political power, the oppressive force, and the ultimate falsehood of what we think of as knowledge. Consequently, we are deceived in that all socio-cultural constructs and institutions are reified, that is, though we think they are rooted in reality, they are, in fact, our creations; what we think is real is actually fiction. Hence, we must be disabused of our reifications.

History, society, and culture, therefore, are best understood, not in terms of progress, but as shifts from one battle zone to another, from one power play to another, from one form of domination to another, all disguised under the rubric of “knowledge.” Foucault is thereby convinced that we all live in a “disciplinary society” whose primary goal is the formation of the person by the mechanisms of power within it. While his book *Discipline and Punish* traces the history of the treatment of prisoners from 16th and 17th century torture to 18th century punishment to 19th and 20th century discipline, this

work is not just about prisons *per se*. Rather, it is presented as a microcosm of the conditions in contemporary culture. He wants his readers to recognize that the prison is an ideal metaphor of our modern disciplinary society in which we are all subjected to massive technologies of subjugation and control ... yet without our knowing it.

This condition exists, not just in the West, but also in all societies globally. The only difference is how power has been or is exercised over people. For example, when Mao-Tse-Tung established the tyranny of communism over China in 1949, "control became increasingly pervasive, and with it the loss of freedom on every front: of speech, movement, work, information. A nation-wide system of concierges called Order-Keeping Committees was established in every factory, village and street.... These committees kept an eye on everyone, not just political suspects and petty criminals. Above all, the regime nailed every person in China to a fixed, and usually immutable, job and place of residence through a registration system (*hu-kou*) begun in July 1951, which soon became iron-clad."²² As the authors of this atom bomb of a biography on Chairman/Comrade Mao clearly reveal, he applied these controlling mechanisms to Chinese society in order to discipline it for one primary purpose and one primary purpose only: to establish, maintain, and extend *his power* over all of China, and from there, hopefully, over the entire world.

²² Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Untold Story* (New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 2005, 2006), p. 320.

Throughout *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault documents the formation of disciplinary societies whose primary goal through its various institutions is the fashioning of mindsets, the shaping of character, and the activation of behaviors of the people within them. In other words, disciplinary societies set their sights on the creation and formation of human persons in their own social image — mind, heart, will and body — by the diverse mechanisms of power within them.

To ensure the effectiveness of the disciplinary strategies designed to shape human lives in a certain way, Foucault highlights the reinforcing power of surveillance, like Jeremy Bentham's panoptic prison system, or like the Order-Keeping Committees established by Chairman Mao mentioned above. As a result, people are seen, but they can't see; they are observed, but can't observe; they are controlled, but can't control. Knowing, however, that you are seen, observed and controlled makes people compliant, for institutional authorities and the state, like Santa Claus, are keeping their omniscient eyes on your behavior, for better or for worse. Indeed, the invention of Santa Claus himself, or at least the following song about him, may be a mechanism of power that parents use to control the behavior of their kids.

You better watch out
You better not cry
Better not pout
I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town
He's making a list
And checking it twice;
Gonna find out who's naughty and nice
Santa Claus is coming to town

He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake!
O! You better watch out!
You better not cry
Better not pout
I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town
Santa Claus is coming to town²³

Out of fear of deviants, malcontents or revolutionaries who would misbehave, threaten the sovereign ruler or the social order — we seem to crave security above all — it was/is necessary to discipline the citizenry from womb to tomb. The end game of a modern disciplinary, and in particular, Western society is to shape people into what it wants them to be: yielding, docile, productive, economically-oriented, materialistic, and self-absorbed, consumers who are obedient to the state — a nation of “normal” people who are behavers, satisfied with their bread and circuses! We the people, despite all our rhetoric about individuality and freedom of choice, are actually pawns on the social and economic chessboard, engineered and reengineered, formed and reformed, puppeteered and managed, supervised and controlled, watched over and dominated by various structures of surveillance and powerful mechanisms of discipline that are virtually omnipresent.

As I mentioned before, Foucault’s analysis of the penitentiary is not just about penitentiaries *per se*, but is about the social prison in

²³ Inspired by a glancing reference by Smith, *Who’s Afraid*, p. 92, note 7. “Santa Claus is Comin’ to Town” is a Christmas song written by J. Fred Coots and Haven Gillespie, and was first sung on Eddie Cantor’s radio show in November 1934. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Claus_Is_Coming_to_Town. Accessed January 31, 2008.

which we are all incarcerated. For the real prison is but a microcosm and metaphor for our culture as a whole. We are all in “jail” according to Foucault, at least socially and culturally speaking, even if we are not actually behind bars. Furthermore, in Foucault’s thinking, this socio-cultural form of incarceration may be worse than the actual penitentiary. “There is no outside,” Foucault says.²⁴ All is prison, all are prisoners, and all is merely on a continuum of control and confinement.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault provides us with some powerful insights into the ways our societies discipline us and shape us into the persons it wants us to be. If, indeed, our societies so discipline us, teaching us what to think (governmentality), how to behave (government) and under what regime of practices to live (disciplines), then is it any wonder that mere attendance at already anemic programs of discipleship in churches or mere enrollment in Christian schools, colleges and universities fail to produce mature, thoughtful, transformed believers in Jesus Christ?

Of Worldviews, the Midriff and the Mook

What, then, are the mentalities of government that are most prevalent today? How are these forms of knowledge conducting our conduct? Under what regimes of practices, and by what set of social disciplines are we being shaped into certain kinds of people? How are these life-shaping influences delivered to us and received today?

To answer the last question first, it seems to me that contemporary forms of media — the various means of mass

²⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 301.

communication including television, radio, magazines, newspapers, films, mp3 players, the internet, etc. — which are virtually omnipresent and omnipotent, are the primary means by which our culture informs, forms, reforms and deforms us today. In another presentation, I have suggested that through various electronic or print media (to which we have direct or indirect exposure approximately eight and a half hours a day), our culture becomes one giant classroom that is teaching us what to think, what to be and what to do. It does this through an unrecognized faculty of celebrities who are imparting to us an idolatrous curriculum to which we are easily conformed through a virtually irresistible system of social assessment or peer pressure.²⁵ The media makes “governmentalization” a snap!

The most prevalent governmentalities, forms of knowledge, or tacit assumptions and presuppositions that reach and shape us through such robust media influence might be broadly labeled as contemporary neo-paganism, moralistic therapeutic deism, and resurgent atheism or naturalism.²⁶ That is, people today are often in

²⁵ Please don't get me wrong. I am not a Christian curmudgeon, or “nattering nabob of negativism,” to use an old political phrase (said by Spiro T. Agnew to describe the news media), complaining smugly about bad people or whining dolefully about the sad state of affairs in our culture. Instead, like Francis Schaeffer, I think our response should be one of tears and compassion, as well as an attempt to speak the truth in love into the culture. Furthermore, because of God's underlying *covenant with creation*, because of *natural law*, and because of *common grace*, we must recognize and appreciate that many people with tremendous talents, regardless of their worldviews, make valuable contributions to our culture and world — past, present, and future. All truth is God's common-grace truth; all goodness is God's common-grace goodness; all beauty is God's common-grace beauty. Along with Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, we must learn to look for and find God in contemporary culture, especially its popular version. See their book, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

²⁶ Former Westminster Seminary professor Peter Jones is calling our attention to contemporary neo-paganism and its worship of sex, the earth, technology, animals, spirits, etc., through his organization Christian Witness to a Pagan Planet and by means of his many books

the grips of mediated mindsets that incline them to worship some aspect of the creation rather than the creator, or cause them to believe that the goal of life is to be happy, to be good, and to call on God when you need him, or to think that God is not great at all and is ultimately a delusion. Convictions like these cannot but help to influence how we conduct ourselves. Convictions like these cannot but help to foster regimes of practices and disciplines that form our identities and determine what we do with our lives. While people fashioned by these ideological forces may be commended by their likeminded friends and associates, Scripture and the Classical and Christian traditions would assess them differently. Plato would place such people in a cave. Proverbs would call them fools; St. Augustine would say their loves and lives were disordered; Kierkegaard would place them in the aesthetic stage of human existence; C. S. Lewis would label them as men without chests, urban block-heads, and trousered apes (*The Abolition of Man*); Bono and U2 would say they exist in a state of “Vertigo.” The 2001 PBS documentary “Merchants of Cool” showed how popular culture driven by the nuclear power of advertising has produced young teenage men and women respectively known as “mooks” and “midriffs.” Using a surging stream of data about the tastes, attitudes, aspirations, identities and desires of American teenagers who are wealthier and more independent than

on this relevant topic. Information is available at: <http://www.cwipp.org/>. Accessed January 31, 2008. Christian Smith and Melinda Denton have called attention to the prevalence of this prominent outlook among American teenagers in their book, *Soul-Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2005). See also the accompanying film based on the book, *Soul-Searching: A Movie About Teenagers and God*, Revelation Studios, featuring music by Switchfoot and Third Day, 2007. On the recent resurgence of atheism and naturalism, see Daniel Dennett, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve Books, Hachette Book Group, 2007); Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (Vintage, 2008).

ever before, advertisers tells a version of teenage life that appeals to their deepest sensibilities, shapes their views of the world, themselves and their parents, and reaches deep into their pocket books to purchase the products and, along with them, the images necessary to thrive, or at least survive, in the overwhelming pressure-cooker of their social and personal lives. Out of this mix of causal factors, there arises the very common “midriff” female and the ever present “mook” male, described in these words at the “Merchants of Cool” website.

The "midriff" -- the character pitched at teenage girls, is the highly-sexualized, world-weary sophisticate that increasingly populates television shows such as Dawson's Creek and films such as "Cruel Intentions." Even more appealing to marketers is the "midriff's" male counterpart, the "mook." Characterized mainly by his infantile, boorish behavior, the "mook" is a perpetual [male] adolescent: crude, misogynistic--and very, very, angry. But also very lucrative. To appeal to the "mook," MTV has created programs such as Spring Break -- a televised version of teen beach debauchery -- as well as a weekly program capitalizing on the current wrestling craze. "What this system does is [that] it closely studies the young, *keeps them under constant surveillance* to figure out what will push their buttons," says media critic Mark Crispin Miller. "And it blares it back at them relentlessly and everywhere."²⁷

²⁷ Synopsis of “Merchants of Cool,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/etc/synopsis.html>. Accessed January 31, 2008 (italics added). See also Kay Hymowitz’s very recent article “The child-man” in the Points section of *The Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, January 27, 2008, pp. 1, 5, section P. The byline to this article states: “Today’s single young men hang out in hormonal limbo between adolescence and adulthood.” This description of young, rather aimless, post-college males fits nicely with the newly coined term: adulescence, defined in this way in one article: “Adulescents (we’ll refer to them as “kidults”) often live with their parents, even after college, while hopping from job to job and relationship to relationship. They generally lack direction, commitment, financial independence, and personal responsibility, while somehow managing to spend more time and money than the average American on clothes, movies, music, computers, video games and eating out.” See Alex and Brett Harris, *Addicted to Adulthood*,”

Even though the focus here is on teenagers, there is a fundamental principle at work that applies to all of us regardless of age. It accounts for the mega-mistake that both churches and Christian education/educators are making today and it is this: the failure to consider the powerful cultural forces that are conforming us so handily to the spirit of the fallen world, and preventing us from fulfilling our purposes as Christian disciples and our callings to genuine godliness.²⁸

Truth be told, we arrive at the church house or the school door pretty much fully-formed, not in the image of Jesus, but in the image of our surrounding culture: its worldviews, ways of life, practices, disciplines and habits. It's not just a matter of what the church or the school is or is not doing, though the importance of this hard to overstate; it's also what church-going Christians and Christian students bring with them from the world either to the sanctuary or to the classroom. This is what will either facilitate or prevent their maturation as Christian disciples. Debra Dean Murphy states the problem well.

Yet we always bring with us into worship [or to school] fluency in other tongues, familiarity with the languages of other powers and discourses that would name and claim us. It is not always easy to recognize what we bring with us to worship [or to

available at the Boundless Webzine: <http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001217.cfm>. Accessed January 31, 2008.

²⁸ Willow Creek's research revealed that "significant barriers" to spiritual growth included the following cultural or "worldly" factors, but they don't seem to recognize just how important these factors are in thwarting their efforts at making Christian disciples. "*Addictions* (out of control spending, gambling, alcohol, pornography, overeating, etc.): 27 percent.... *Inappropriate relationships* (an emotional or physical affair, other relationships that pull them away from God): 16 percent.... *Emotional issues* (depression, anger stuffing emotions, etc.): 48 percent.... *Not prioritizing one's spiritual life* (spending more time on other things like TV, Internet, e-mails, movies, shopping): 89%..... See *Reveal: Where Are You?* p. 49.

school] — much of it is subtle and unspoken, rooted in the broader cultural socialization each of us undergoes as a citizen of the wider world, a socialization that often goes unreflected and uncommented upon. But what we bring with us to worship [or to campus] has everything to do with how we worship [or learn] and how we are shaped by the worship we offer.

...

The pressing question [therefore] for those concerned about catechesis and Christian formation, then, is how can we help people faithfully to hear and manifest the gospel ... [whether at church or school] where our shared experiences are the ones provided by TV shows and commercials, Hollywood movies, media-narrated tragedies, celebrity gossip, and pop-cultural trivia.²⁹

Instead of remaining blind to the governmentalities that govern the conduct of our conduct and do so through a variety of regimes of practices and social disciplines, we must name them, expose them, critique them, resist them, and replace them with a new narrative, a fresh moral vision, a new set of practices and disciplines so that we have a fighting chance to succeed in our missions both in the church and at the school. As Murphy points out, “And so the task ... is to name those powers that come into the sanctuary [and educational] space with us, to acknowledge their implications for shaping worshippers [and students], to evaluate them in light of the gospel and its witness, and — probably most important — to offer when necessary effective means of resistance to them.”³⁰ If we don’t do this, then the mega-church mistake will be reduplicated in the

²⁹ Murphy, *Teaching That Transforms*, pp. 119, 126.

³⁰ Murphy, *Teaching That Transforms*, p. 119.

Christian university, and much of our daily educational effort — accompanied with blood, sweat, toil and tears — will be undertaken largely for naught.