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Christian Practices as Counter Discourse: Foucault, Barth, and the Discourse of Higher Education



By Jason Lief

Introduction

The ongoing conversation regarding the purpose and nature of Christian higher education has tended to focus upon the relationship between academic content and Christian perspective.¹ That Christian colleges and universities should employ similar institutional structures, study the same subjects, and prepare students for the same types of jobs as their secular counterparts seems to be taken for granted. However, these structures are comprised of disciplinary mechanisms, procedures, and techniques that have a powerful influence upon students. They have produced an

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institutional language that has normalized certain educational practices, establishing the parameters for what is considered a legitimate approach to higher education within contemporary society and within the Christian community.

The work of French philosopher Michel Foucault explores the nature and function of power within cultural life—specifically focusing upon how the development of institutions has influenced modern, social power relationships. Fundamentally, Christianity claims that there has been a radical reorientation of power in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but what this means for the engagement of cultural life differs even within the Reformed tradition—as seen in the perspectives of John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and Jacques Ellul.² Our primary concern is the form of institutional power known as the college or the university. For most Christians, a Christian perspective of higher education does not mean the total rejection of formal educational structures, but neither should it entail an uncritical acceptance. Instead, the Christian community must discern the theological and philosophical foundations of modern educational structures and the manner in which they form and shape students—not for the sake of endless critique but for the purpose of developing alternative structures rooted in a biblical understanding of power.

Using the insights of Michael Foucault and Karl Barth, this essay will offer a critique of the modern structures of higher education to reveal the influence of a corporate discourse that objectifies knowledge for the sake of control, utility, and the production of economic power. This critique

suggests that the Christian community provide a counter discourse, calling for the development of educational structures that create space for students to claim their human identity in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Foucault's Critique

We will base that counter discourse in the work of Foucault. A primary theme in Foucault's work is the development of new forms of disciplinary power through the creation of institutional mechanisms and techniques. While, historically, power manifested itself in a form of subtraction—the right of a sovereign to take life—Foucault argues that modern institutions now generate a form of power that produces, grows, and orders life.³ This change is evident in institutions like the factory, the school, and the prison, which provide the social mechanisms necessary for producing a “useful population” through the scientific application of disciplinary power. By enclosing students, workers, and prisoners in a strategically organized space with constant supervision, the people in power discovered that subjects could be efficiently managed and manipulated.⁴ The keeping track of attendance, constant assessing, and assigning of a rank or classification represented a “policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior...[,] a machinery of power that explores [the human body], breaks it down and rearranges it.”⁵

Foucault describes how institutional life allowed for the transformation of “the confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities” for the sake of production and efficiency.⁶ This new form of power had enormous political and economic implications, resulting in the formation of a society in which individuals become “meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine” through coercion, training, and a manufactured state of docility.⁷

A significant by-product of modern institutional power, according to Foucault, is the production of new forms of knowledge—what he refers to as “discourses.”⁸ These are not simply linguistic representations of reality or scientific language asserting objective truth; rather, they form a “discursive regime,” which establishes the boundaries for legitimate ways of speaking and

thinking about life within society.⁹ As new forms of disciplinary power are established, they produce discourses as a way to legitimize the new social order. These discourses become the unquestioned scientific “regime of truth” concerning the human condition in the context of modern institutional life, establishing the parameters of what is considered “normal.”¹⁰ The result is the legitimization of the status quo and a mad rush to uniformity as specific structures, techniques, and ways of speaking become the unquestioned truth regarding the cultural spheres of human life.

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Christian Higher Education

Foucault's analysis of modern institutional life provides an important context for the examination of the contemporary structures of higher education. With schooling firmly entrenched as the means to economic, political, and social progress, higher education has come under the influence of a corporate paradigm that applies the principles of “scientific management” to teaching and learning.¹¹

The period of economic growth following World War II, along with the continued transformation of work, resulted in a rapid expansion of higher education at the close of the twentieth century; this rapid expansion further cemented the bond between schooling and economic progress.¹² During this time, administrators began to implement business principles (marketing, assessment, the development of pre-professional programs, etc.) as a way for colleges and universities to be competitive and attract students.¹³ At the same time, students came to be seen as customers,

or, as Jeffrey Williams describes in his essay *Brave New University*, “shoppers at the education store, buying a career-enhancing service.”¹⁴ This approach to education ultimately leads to what Williams refers to as the “indentured students phenomenon,” as students are forced into certain forms of work upon graduation to pay off the debt incurred from the cost of a college education.¹⁵

The deeper consequence of this paradigm is seen in the perceived value of teaching and learning.¹⁶ Henry Giroux writes, “The good life in this discourse ‘is constructed in terms of our identities as consumers—we are what we buy.’ Public spheres are replaced by commercial spheres as the substance of critical democracy is emptied out and replaced by a democracy of goods, consumer lifestyles, shopping malls, and the increasing expansion of the cultural and political power of corporations throughout the world.”¹⁷ In this context, as academic disciplines are increasingly measured by their market value, the primary question asked of an area of study is this: What type of employment will be available upon graduation?¹⁸ Institutionally, this question has led professional consultants to encourage colleges and universities to behave more like corporations—looking for “market niches” and exchanging traditional forms of governance for corporate structures.¹⁹ The effect upon the curriculum has been the normalization of disciplines and programs perceived to be economically viable, while those deemed to have less vocational utility are left to market themselves or face the threat of downsizing.

A consequence of this pragmatic economic paradigm has been the production of a new discourse within education—a type of scientific rhetoric that reduces teaching and learning to data and techniques that can be controlled and manipulated. In this context, good pedagogy is reduced to effective strategies, high assessment scores, and the dissemination of information, usually through PowerPoint slides—all for the sake of quantification and measurability. The system of grades and credits, combined with an emphasis upon productivity—whether it is large amounts of reading or the mere cranking out of papers—reinforces this economic discourse by encouraging a shallow engagement of texts and ideas for the sake of production.

A further consequence is the increased fragmentation of knowledge. As students enter college seeking a pragmatic path to gainful employment, there has developed what Wendell Berry refers to as a “specialist ideology enforced by a commercial compulsion to satisfy the customer....”²⁰ This specialist ideology artificially carves up subjects, pitting divisions and departments against one another as they work to attract students—keeping them busy with program requirements. For Berry, the big picture is lost, as we are no longer able to communicate across subjects and disciplines. In this context, language becomes a tool for asserting power and legitimizing the structures and discourses of the status quo.²¹

For Christian colleges and universities, language usage is further complicated by the biblical and theological rhetoric used to justify institutional structures. Such language, along with chapel programs and the popular Christian “worldview” or “perspective,” is essential for distinguishing Christian institutions from their secular counterparts. Yet, given that the institutional structures mirror those of secular institutions, the corporate discourse remains entrenched. The end result is the cooption of biblical and theological rhetoric as it is assimilated into the dominant corporate paradigm, implicitly associating the kingdom of God and Christian calling with the values of a consumer, market-driven view of higher education, as well as the divine sanction of the status quo.

A Christian Perspective of Higher Education: Karl Barth’s Anthropology

Rather than appropriating modern educational structures that perpetuate the discourse of scientific management and corporate capitalism, a Christian perspective of higher education must fundamentally challenge the understanding of human identity that undergirds the corporate discourse. The counter discourse offered by the Christian community must be rooted in a biblical and theological understanding of human identity and must be able to seriously engage the contemporary cultural situation described by Foucault’s critique.²² While I recognize that a variety of perspectives from various Christian traditions can and do offer such a prophetic critique, I believe that the work of Karl

Barth has important implications for our current cultural situation.

Barth begins his discussion of the human person by asserting that all attempts to define humanity through scientific or philosophical discourse only address what he calls “human phenomena”—the symptoms of humanity—and are unable to penetrate what he refers to as the “real [human].”²³ For Barth the only means by which we are able to come to a true knowledge of human nature is through God’s Word, spoken in the true human—Jesus Christ. He writes, “if we select any other starting point for our study, we shall reach only the phenomena of the human. . . . In this case we miss the one Archimedean point given us beyond humanity, and therefore the one possibility of discovering the ontological determination of man.”²³

In this way, Jesus Christ is revealed to be the covenant partner existing with and for God, as well as true humanity existing with and for fellow humans. This idea leads Barth to characterize the New Testament as an “incomparable picture of human life and character. What emerges in it is a supreme ‘I’ wholly determined by and to the ‘Thou.’”²⁴ Here, Barth defines human identity as a Trinitarian “being in encounter,” which is realized in the history of Jesus Christ, in whom we discover the true history and identity of humanity, existing in relationship with God, humanity, and creation.²⁵

Here we find a basis for a Christian perspective of higher education—the creation of a space in which, through our common academic task, we are opened to the possibility of encounter as we engage in mutual speaking and listening and learn to joyfully exist with and for the Other.²⁶ In this context, educational structures and practices work to create and protect the space necessary for students to claim their human identity in Jesus Christ as they encounter God, their fellow humanity, and the created world.

At this point, Foucault’s critique and Barth’s theological anthropology intersect. Just as Foucault unmasks the so-called truth claims made by the discourses that legitimize modern forms of institutional power, so too, Barth believed, theology served the university best by acting as “a disruptive influence, [reminding] the. . . sciences of their inability to demonstrate their ultimate

presuppositions, and of the fallibility not only of their propositions but even of their norms and methods.”²⁷ Barth does not reject science; instead, he affirms that science and philosophy reveal important truths about what it means to be human.²⁸ He is, however, strongly opposed to the reduction of human identity to scientific discourse

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and believes that the Christian community must always reject such attempts upon biblical grounds. The temptation—and often the reality—within Christian education is that we allow the prevailing scientific discourse to lead the way when it comes to the formation of educational structures and practices. However, both Foucault’s critique and Barth’s theological anthropology provide a valuable challenge to the corporate, economic interpretation of power and human identity.

So what is the place of Christian practices in the context of this discussion? Ultimately, this issue requires the full engagement of the Christian imagination—to which modern educational institutions and structures are vehemently hostile. A significant resource for beginning to think imaginatively about how such structures might look is found within the rich tradition of the Christian practices, upon which Barth actually draws in the last section of his *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*.

Barth believes that two practices are essential for the academic life: prayer and study (meditation). Prayer challenges the tendency within academia to make scientific definitions of humanity and human experience absolute; instead it forces open our closed systems by confronting our definitions of reality with the power of Christ's death and resurrection. Prayer molds our patterns of thought, our imagination, and our perspective, so that we are open to the word that God speaks in Jesus Christ rather than continually baptizing our own interpretations of the world. Christian colleges must intentionally make space for the form of prayer that challenges the status quo, pleads for the Kingdom to come, and opens our eyes to presence of Christ in the world. As we do so, we must model and teach students to pray—both inside and outside the classroom—in a way that challenges the contemporary discourse and opens us to the power and possibility of Christ's kingdom. This prayer life is not to suggest that the work of the academy is in some way spiritually deficient in its own right or that by adding prayer to our actions we are increasing the spiritual worth of such activities. Rather, it is done in order to shape and form our thoughts and actions in the context of a human identity rooted in Jesus Christ.

Just as important for Barth is the discipline of study, by which students seriously engage the intellectual and contemplative life. He argues that students should not study just to pass an exam or get a degree; instead, students participate in the academic life for the sake of becoming a learner.²⁹ Helping students become learners means fostering an approach to study that does not primarily seek economic or political gain but that, instead, affirms the importance and worth of the subject being explored for its own sake. Such an approach involves engaging each subject in love, humility, and willingness to affirm the mystery of the other. The Christian community must challenge the dominant economic discourse by insisting that students and faculty take their work seriously simply for the sake of the work to be done. For this to happen, however, colleges and universities must establish structures that minimize distractions and create space for inquiry, dialogue, and contemplation, consciously dethroning the gods of efficiency and production in favor of such seemingly inefficient practices as generous reading

and the engagement of ideas and conversation.

While there is more to be said concerning the development of structures and practices, the primary purpose of this paper has been to engage the insights of Foucault and Barth as a critique of the corporate discourse prevalent within Christian higher education. For Barth, human identity can never be reduced to the scientific discourse of the status quo; instead, it must always be rooted in the Word, spoken in Jesus Christ. The responsibility of Christian higher education is to establish educational structures and pedagogical practices that help students lay claim to this identity—liberating them from the distorted narratives found in higher education and opening them to the possibility of encounter through the mystery of teaching and learning.

Endnotes

1. See *Making Higher Education Christian: The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America*, eds. Joel A. Carpenter and Kenneth W. Shipps (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987); *The Secularization of the Academy*, eds. George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and James Tunstead Burtchald, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998.)
2. See William Bouwsma, *John Calvin: a Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1931); and Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991).
3. Michael Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life," *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). Foucault writes, "'Deduction' has tended to be no longer the major form of power but merely one element among others, working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them" (259).
4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 143.

5. Ibid., 138.
6. Ibid., 148; 154.
7. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 169. See also Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980). Foucault writes, "We need to see how these mechanisms of power, at a given moment, in a precise conjecture and by means of a certain number of transformations, have begun to become economically advantageous and politically useful" (101). Foucault also writes, "In fact the two processes—the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital—cannot be separated; it would not have been possible to solve the problem of the accumulation of men without the growth of an apparatus of production capable of both sustaining them and using them; conversely, the techniques that made the cumulative multiplicity of men useful accelerated the accumulation of capital."
8. Ibid., p. 27. Foucault writes "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." Also see Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).
9. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, 113.
10. Foucault writes, "It is a question of what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other so as to constitute a set of propositions which are scientifically acceptable, and hence capable of being verified or falsified by scientific procedures. In short, there is a problem of the regime, the politics of the scientific statement" ("Truth and Power," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977* [112; 131]).
11. See Frederick Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1911). Also see J.M. Rice, *Scientific Management in Education* (New York: Hinds, Noble, and Eldredge, 1913). This is further demonstrated by the Rockefeller General Education Board's involvement in the attempt to "modernize" schooling. In a document entitled *Occasional Letter Number One*, the following mission statement for compulsory education was given: "In our dreams...people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hands. The present education conventions fade from their minds, and unhampered by tradition we work our own goodwill upon a grateful and responsive folk." See John Gatto, *A Different Kind of Teacher: Solving the Crisis of American Schooling* (Berkeley, California: Berkeley Hills Books, 2001), 52. A *New York Times* editorial, responding to the approval of the Rockefeller plan, prophetically states, "But we make bold to say that young men and women trained in this manner would be destitute of culture...Imagination will be cramped and stunted, knowledge and enlightenment abridged and shorn of those intellectual pleasures and satisfactions which make them a rich possession. The modern scholar, if these theories prevail, will be a man profoundly versed in automobiles, steamship construction, bridge building, microscopic analysis, chemical reactions, hydraulics and hydrostatics, and the uses of electricity for lighting and heating, while the young women who enjoy these priceless early advantages will be able to build and operate a creamery, run a sewing machine, direct the instillation of a domestic heating plant, and preside over parlor meetings of ladies ardently pursuing the study of "civics." Neither of them will have an idea or be able to form an intelligent opinion upon subjects not directly related to gainful pursuits" ("Radical and Dangerous," Jan 21, 1917, E2). See also Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), who includes the following quote from *Atlantic Monthly* in 1910: "our universities are beginning to be run as business colleges. They advertise, they compete with one another, they pretend to give good value to their customers. They desire to increase their trade, they offer social advantages and business openings to their patrons" (7).
12. See Brian D. Denman, "What is a University in the 21st Century?" *Higher Education Management and Policy* 17.2 (2005). See also Phillip Brown, A.H. Halsey, Hugh Lauder, and Amy Stuart Wells, eds., "The Transformation of Education and Society: An Introduction," *Education, Culture, Economy, and Society* (New York: Oxford Press, 1997). They write, "Consequently, the education systems of the western world expanded to perform their new role of providing the human capital, as it came to be called in the mid 1950's..."(5).
13. See Derek Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). Harry Lewis, *Excellence Without a Soul: Does Liberal Education Have a Future?* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006); Stanley Aronowitz, "The New Corporate University: Higher Education Becomes Higher Training," *Dollars & Sense* 216 (Mar/Apr 1998).
14. Jeffrey Williams, "Brave New University," *College English* 61.6 (July 1999), 747.

15. Ibid. Williams goes on to write, “This commodification of students’ interests manifests itself ideologically, in projecting their experience primarily as monetary exchange: their tuition buys the accreditation necessary to get a professional-managerial class job.” Williams also writes, “In a different way, commodification occurs more concretely in the recent disproportionate rise in college costs and the ensuing re-structuring of financial aid—in other words, in what is done to students materially, as objects of banking profit and interest instead of what is projected ideologically as in their interest...” (747). Also see John Palatella, “Ivory Towers in the Marketplace,” *Dissent Magazine*, Summer 2001.
16. Henry Giroux, “The Corporate War Against Higher Education,” *Workplace Journal* 5.1 (October 2002). Henry Giroux describes as education “an all-encompassing horizon for producing market identities, values, and practices.”
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid. Giroux writes, “students now rush to take courses and receive professional credentials that provide them with the cache they need to sell themselves to the highest bidder.”
19. Ibid. Jeffrey Williams refers to this as “the codification of administrators as corporate managers, overseeing and pressuring faculty toward greater ‘productivity’...” (*College English* 61.6 [July 1999]: 746.)
20. Wendell Berry, “The Loss of the University,” *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 77.
21. Ibid. Also see Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007). In his essay “What Would a Christian University Look Like?” Hauerwas writes, “The perversion of speech illustrated by attempts to be ‘objective’ serves the political purpose of securing the power of those who use it without their being held accountable” (95-96). Also see David Kirp, *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). Kirp describes the influence of the corporate discourse upon higher education through the use of such terms as “customer orientation,” “total quality management,” “enrollment management,” and “streamlining” (13-16).
22. In his essay “The Loss of the University,” Berry writes, “what universities...are mandated to make or to help to make is human beings in the fullest sense of those words—not just trained workers or knowledgeable citizens but responsible heirs and members of human culture.” He goes on to write, “The common denomination has to be larger than either career preparation or preparation for citizenship. Underlying the idea of a university—the bringing together, the combining into one, of all the disciplines—is the idea that good work and good citizenship are the inevitable by-products of the making of a good—that’s a full developed—human being. This as I understand it, is the definition of the name university” (*Home Economics*, 77).
23. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960). Barth writes, “In accordance with the postulate of our theological presupposition we have recognized that the significance of the conclusions about human nature possible on the way of autonomous self-understanding depends upon their reference to a reality which does not emerge as such on this way. In other words, their significance consists in the fact that in themselves, as the conclusions of man’s own effort at self-understanding, they refer only to phenomena of the human, in which we can see symptoms of the human itself only when the latter is known to us, but which in and of themselves tell us nothing about real man” (122). Also see Daniel Price, *Karl Barth’s Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 122-124.
24. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol III, 132.
25. Ibid., 216.
26. Ibid., 250.
27. Ibid., 252-253.
28. Bruce L. McCormack, “Theology and Science: Karl Barth’s Contribution to an Ongoing Debate,” *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 289.
29. See the conclusion of his section on “Real Man,” *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 200-202.