

**BOOK REVIEW**  
of  
D. A. Carson,  
*Christ & Culture Revisited*,  
Eerdmans, 2008.

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This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

In 1951, H. Richard Niebuhr published his book *Christ and Culture*. It is still available from used book sources, and in 2001 Harper Collins republished it (it is available from Amazon.com). Niebuhr is considered by many (see Wikipedia) to be “one of the most important Christian theological-ethicists in 20th century America”. He taught for several decades at Yale Divinity School, and contributed to post-liberal theology. Since he was not an evangelical, nor at all conservative, and he died in 1962, and probably his most important book, *Christ and Culture*, was published in 1951, and there is a fair chance that you may have never heard of him, why would D. A. Carson want to publish a book using Niebuhr’s book as a point of launching? Ideas have consequences. And Carson is convinced that Niebuhr’s book touched on very important concerns, has had a very enduring influence, and that “it is difficult, at least in the English-speaking world, to ignore him. His work, for good and ill, has shaped much of the discussion.” (pp. x-xi) A basic question for Christians is: how should Christianity relate to culture? How should it relate to *our* culture? How should we be engaged? Starting with Niebuhr’s book, Carson addresses these concerns. Carson is research professor of new testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and is a prolific writer.

The book *Christ & Culture* contains six chapters. Chapter 1 is titled *How to Think about Culture: Reminding Ourselves of Niebuhr*. Chapter 2 is titled *Niebuhr Revised: The Impact of Biblical Theology*. Chapter 3 is titled *Refining Culture and Redefining Postmodernism*. Chapter 4 is *Secularism, Democracy, Freedom, and Power*. Chapter 5 is *Church and State*. Chapter 6 is *On Disputed Agendas, Frustrated Utopias, and Ongoing Tensions*.

In Chapter 1, Carson, after discussing the difficulty of defining what is precisely meant by culture, defines what he means by use of the term “culture”. He also introduces the challenge for Christians of relating to the surrounding culture outside of the church, and how this has always been a challenge from the first-century church up through the current day. Carson explains why this is a challenge much more-so for Christians than it was for ancient Israel: “In the move from the old covenant to the new, the focus of the covenant people passed from the covenant-nation to the international covenant-people. That inevitably raised questions about the relationships this people should have with the people around them who were *not* part of the new covenant.” Issues that can readily be identified include the relationship between church and state, “whether Christians should participate in socially expected customs when those customs had religious overtones”, just war theories, the relative merits of one culture over another, the relative merits of one religion over another, etc. How should Christians engage culture? Niebuhr had offered five options, and Carson introduces those five in his Chapter 1 (he critiques them in Chapter 2). Niebuhr’s five options are briefly stated as follows: (1) Christ against Culture, (2) The Christ of Culture, (3) Christ above Culture, (4) Christ and Culture in Paradox, and (5) Christ the Transformer of Culture.

In Chapter 2, Carson critiques Niebuhr’s contributions to an understanding of Christ and culture. Carson indicates several strengths of Niebuhr’s contributions. One strength is that Niebuhr’s analysis was very inclusive. It “embraces Catholics and Protestants, East and West, examples from the Fathers, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the modern period, conservatives and liberals”, etc. Also, one “of the attractive features of Niebuhr’s work is his effort to ground most of his five patterns in the Scriptures themselves”. “One of the attractive features of Niebuhr’s work is his crisp discussion of many historical figures.” However, while appreciating some of Niebuhr’s analysis, Carson also takes strong exception. While Niebuhr’s inclusiveness is commendable, “it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Niebuhr’s comprehensiveness is also a deadly weakness.” He includes virtually everyone, and does not give much of a definition as to just what it means to be a Christian. He not only includes Catholics and classical Protestants, but also Gnostics, Arians, Nestorians, and modern liberals. In attempting to say something useful as to how Christians should interface with the surrounding culture, it seems necessary to define in some way what a Christian is, and that means excluding some who make use of the Christian name. For example, “liberalism is not another denomination or any other kind of legitimate option within Christianity. Rather, it is another religion.” Carson also strongly criticizes Niebuhr’s handling of Scripture. Carson lists some points that he considers non-negotiables. This list includes (1) the Bible as a *whole* constitutes the canon (one part is not played against another), (2) God created everything, (3) the human race is a fallen race, but made in God’s image, and (4) God is sovereign over all.

In Chapter 3, Carson first addresses further the Christian’s understanding of culture in the light of Scripture. Carson claims that, “from a Christian perspective, everything that is detached from the sheer centrality of God is an evil. It is horrifically God-defying. In that sense, from a Christian perspective every cultural stance that does not sing with joy and obedience, ‘Jesus is Lord!’ falls under the same indictment. In this sense, all cultures this side of the fall are evil.” Carson also discusses the prevailing postmodernism of the current United States culture. One feature of postmodernism is its hesitancy to speak of truth in any objective sense. Carson replies: “This reluctance to speak of truth is notoriously distant from the biblical writers.” Carson continues: “faith is invalidated if its object is untrustworthy, or, where ostensible facts are concerned, if the object of faith is not true. . . . It follows that if we believe something that is *not* true, ‘we are to be pitied more than all others.’ . . . Faith

without a true object, Paul asserts, is pitiful. . . . In much of the Western world, however, faith is not at all tied to the truthfulness or reliability of its object. Faith is little more than personal, subjective, religious preference.”

In Chapter 4, Carson addresses specific issues that, while they may be widely applied, are of special interest to the current culture of the United States: secularization, democracy, freedom, and power. In the US the word secular “is a word with positive overtones.” It can mean simply separation of church and state. However, it “is usually understood to be the social reality that fosters nonreligious or even anti-religious consciousness.” “More precisely, secularization is the process that progressively removes religion from the public arena and reduces it to the private realm”. This movement, of course, removes Christianity from having any real impact of public policy and can readily be seen by Christians as suspect at least. However, when it comes to democracy the tension between it and Christianity may not be as readily seen. “Most people in the West would say, unhesitatingly, that democracy is a good thing.” However, history “coughs up many examples where democracy cannot be counted on to do the right thing”. Can we count on popular vote to establish just laws and morality? But how about freedom? Is freedom something that Christians can always support? “One may be ‘free’ from the constraints of the state, but one may also be ‘free’ from traditions, free from God, free from morality, free from inhibitions, free from oppressive parents, free from wise parents, free from assignments of various kinds, free from sin, and much more.” Whether Christians can support ‘freedom’ or not depends on the kind of freedom. What about abortion, research using human embryos, pornography, homosexual marriages, prayer in public schools, etc.? A clash between Christianity and a libertine society seems inevitable. Some things that society embraces as freedom are seen as a form of bondage by Christians. Carson next addresses power. We may think of power as bad, but “the exercise of power is not always a bad thing. Within the family, a complete want of discipline, an utter power vacuum, regularly results in disoriented and anarchic children.” And when there is a crime in progress, “most of us are pretty glad if the police show up in strength and exercise a little power.” However, “every form of power can be abused. . . . the lust for power – spelled out in money, influence, exposure, high-profile jobs – is so intense that it frequently blinds those who hold these jobs as to the nature of their calling and thus to the importance of truth and integrity.” In summary, “We cannot embrace unrestrained secularism; democracy is not God; freedom can be another word for rebellion; the lust for power, as universal as it is, must be viewed with more than a little suspicion. This means that Christian communities honestly seeking to live under the Word of God will inevitably generate cultures that, to say the least, will in some sense counter or confront the values of the dominant culture.”

In Chapter 5, Carson discusses the separation of church and state. Whereas this fits somewhat within the topics of Chapter 4, under secularism, Carson devotes a somewhat lengthy (over 50 pages) chapter to the topic. This topic is perhaps a little more sticky than we have imagined, and it takes some discussion to bring things out. Although the discussion is fruitful, in this review I will focus on Carson’s conclusions. Carson advises that the lesser of evils is what we should be prepared to accept in the near term: “Religious pluralism cannot be an ultimate good, for it will not be found in the new heaven and the new earth, toward which we press; but if in this broken world it curbs violence and coercion, if it promotes relative freedom among those who (whether they recognize it or not) bear God’s image, then we thank God for the gifts of common grace and for the wisdom of the Master who insisted on some kind of distinction, no matter how complex and how little absolute, between the sphere of Caesar and the sphere of God.” “As for democracy, if we promote it, we do so not because we take it to be an absolute good, still less as the solution to all political problems, and not even because it is an ideal form of government, but because, granted that the world is fallen and all of us prone to the most grotesque evils, it appears to be the least objectionable option.” Carson also makes some very interesting comments about the United States, and Western civilization in general, about which some Christians seem to hold onto the illusion that we are a Christian society: “From a Christian point of view, it is unhelpful to speak of ‘the Christian West’ or of ‘our Christian nation’ or the like. In America, this is not only because of the legal force of the First Amendment (however it is interpreted) but also because nowadays the numeric shift in numbers of Christians, from West to East and North to South, is so dramatic that such expressions sound increasingly parochial and out of date.”

In Chapter 6, Carson summarizes the previous chapters and ties together what may be thought of as loose ends. He acknowledges that “Perhaps the most seminal evangelical thinkers on this topic during the last century and a half are Abraham Kuyper, Carl F. H. Henry, Francis Schafer, and John Howard Yoder.” He also acknowledges J. Budziszewski, J. Gresham Machen, and I. Howard Marshall. While the focus of Christians is often on presenting the claims of Christ to individuals and working for their regeneration, Carson concludes with the following: “Christian educational and academic structures *may* help countless thousands develop a countercultural way of looking at all reality under the Lordship of Christ. Sometimes a disease *can* be knocked out; sometimes sex traffic *can* be considerably reduced; sometimes slavery *can* be abolished in a region; sometimes more equitable laws *can* foster justice and reduce corruption; sometimes engagement in the arts *can* produce wonderful work that inspires a new generation. . . . doing good to the city, doing good to all people (even if we have special responsibility for the household of faith), is part of our responsibility as God’s redeemed people in this time of tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’”

While this book is well written, the vocabulary modest, and the educational background required reasonable, I found it a difficult and challenging book to read. The topic is broad and indeed challenging and it is not easy to come to simple answers. Yet, if we want to be good witnesses to our relatives and neighbors, it seems that this material is very helpful not only in terms of good apologetics, but also in terms of helping us see things from the perspective of others. Many of these issues are not simple, but if we are to engage those around us they seem to be unavoidable.