

# **D. A. CARSON'S *CHRIST AND CULTURE REVISITED*: A REFLECTION AND A RESPONSE\***

by  
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## **Introduction**

Published in 1951, H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work *Christ and Culture* has remained a standard reference for believers who are self-consciously and deliberately analytical of their interaction with the world. But as is the case with every topic (much less this one), it is not the final word on the issue that it addresses. While biblical doctrines do not change, of course, each needs to be revisited from time to time to address the new "twists," challenges, criticisms, and even downright assaults that each successive generation supplies. Such is particularly true when the topic of discussion directly involves *culture*—a phenomenon that is evolving at a more frenetic pace today that at any other time in human history. Further, as D. A. Carson well demonstrates in his *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Eerdmans, 2008), Niebuhr's work was not completely satisfactory even in its own day. However, since Niebuhr's typology of cultural engagement has become such a tour de force in nearly all discussions of the topic, even today, his work remains a suitable reference point for discussion and correction. The following is a summary and critique of Carson's work *Christ and Culture Revisited*, together with something of a positive statement of my own understanding of the issues where it differs from Carson's.

## **Background:**

- H. Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962)
- D. A. Carson

## **Niebuhr in Review**

- Two Poles:
  - Christ Against Culture
  - Christ of Culture
- Median Views:
  - Christ Above Culture (Synthesist view)
  - Christ Transforming Culture (Conversionist View)
  - Christ and Culture in Paradox (Dualist View)

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\*A full text review is forthcoming in the Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal (Fall 2008).

### **Carson's Critique of Niebuhr**

- The Problem of Inadequate Theological Commitments
- The Problem of Reductionism and "Pigeon-holing"
- The Problem of Suppressing the Biblical Plotline, Reading Modern Theology Back into the Text, and Setting Biblical Figures Against Each Other
- The Problem of Taxonomic Inadequacy
- The Problem of Equivocation

### **Defining *Christ, Culture* and the Audience in Niebuhr and Carson**

- Christ as one of several Loci of Christian Authority
- Culture as "Elitism" or Shared Values?
- Christian Audience as Individual or Collective?

### **On Carson and Critical Thinking**

- Thinking Biblically About "Four Huge Cultural Forces."
- A Call for Discernment at the Level of Practice and Worldview

### **Response and Proposal**

- Concerns
  - Disproportionate Criticism of Niebuhr's Taxonomy
  - An Over-Realized Eschatology
  - Denial of a "Master Model"
- Contributions Toward a Master Model from Paul (Romans 14; 1 Cor 8, 10)
  - If the *practice* of eating meat is inextricably linked with pluralist/idolatrous *beliefs* and *values*, then the *practice* itself promotes pluralism/idolatry and is therefore wrong (1 Cor 8:10–13; 10:14–22).
  - If the *practice* of eating meat is so *perceived* to be tied to pluralist/idolatrous *beliefs* and *values* that it causes a brother to entertain these wicked values, the practice is unwise and dangerous, and for all practical purposes, wrong (1 Cor 10:28–29).
  - If the *practice* of eating meat is substantially distanced from idolatrous *beliefs* and *values*, then it is good and even encouraged (1 Cor 10:25, 27).
- A Master Model at the Values Level

- Believers should courageously resist cultural practices that are intrinsically evil (i.e., practices that are explicitly unbiblical or by sound application of the *analogia fidei* may be deduced as such). We should expect that our culture, being the product of its own depraved religious values, will contain much of this.
- Believers should eschew cultural practices that are intrinsically good and even biblically sanctioned if they stem from *and actively promote* unbiblical and/or non-theistic (i.e., “worldly”) values. Again, we should expect that our culture, being the product of its own depraved religious values, will contain much of this “worldliness.”
- Believers should exercise humble reserve in their response to cultural practices that are intrinsically good and even biblically sanctioned *if they might be perceived* as promoting unbiblical and non-theistic (i.e., “worldly”) values—particularly if that perception tempts others to embrace those values and thus to sin (Rom 14:23).
- Believers may, however, adopt cultural practices that stem directly from common-grace values (what Greg Bahnsen and Cornelius Van Til call “borrowed” capital in their various writings), investing in them “new law” significance that relieves them of the incongruence that marks their expression in secular society.

## Conclusion

The discernment of the church at large has been made dull by the assumption of benignity and neutrality in the dominant culture(s) of this world, and it is high time to rein in the church’s embrace of worldliness as it rushes eagerly toward the world under the banner of contextualized relevancy. Truly, “to the degree that...Christianity has assimilated itself to the dominant ethos, reasons for anyone joining it are harder to come by,”<sup>1</sup> and we must never become so eager to contextualize and acculturate that we fail to press the antithesis that the Gospel demands. I can generally commend Carson’s book *Christ and Culture Revisited* as helpful toward that end.

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<sup>1</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, p. 118.