

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

by
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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 than 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, then, 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.

By way of background, H. Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962) was something of a transitional figure between neo-orthodoxy and neo-liberalism, a transition reflective of the theological evolution of Yale Divinity School, from which Niebuhr took his Ph.D. in 1924 and where he taught theology and ethics from 1931 to 1962. Much more could be said of Niebuhr, but two factors immediately stand out. First, Niebuhr's career spans a transitional period in the prevailing definition of *culture* (from culture as an "elitist" idea to culture as the generic, neutral idea of one's societal milieu), and Niebuhr is prone to equivocation in his use of the term. Second, Niebuhr's theological stance places him outside (or at best the left fringe) of evangelicalism,

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rendering his concept of *Christ* a bit broader than most conservative evangelicals would allow. So apart from any other considerations, we find plenty of fodder for critique of Niebuhr even before his typology of cultural engagement can be examined for approval or disapproval.

D. A. Carson, one of the most prominent evangelical academics of our day, needs little introduction. Most who read this review have undoubtedly read and used several of his 50+ books in the course of their ministry lives. Carson is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, where he has served for thirty years. His areas of expertise, however, extend beyond the New Testament to include areas of philosophy, postmodernism, ethics, and cultural engagement. Perhaps the best-known reflection of these areas of expertise can be found in his *Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996). I find myself generally favorable toward Carson in much that he writes, though his associational umbrella is broader than my own, and his theological commitments are not identical with mine in every respect. Some of this will emerge in the review and response that follows.

Niebuhr in Review

Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, while referenced by many, has been read by relatively few and has been studied by still fewer. At the risk of fueling this omission, it behooves us to begin with a brief review of Niebuhr's taxonomy of social engagement as a necessary starting point for further discussion. In his book, Niebuhr first identifies two polar positions that form the termini of the discussion:

- Christ Against Culture: Non-Christian culture is irreparably corrupted, so the "new law" of Christ (whether as a biblicist or mystical conception) must wholly govern Christian conduct. Those who ascribe to this "new law" produce a new community in which "separation of the community with this ethics from the world with a false ethics is sought; the direction of life is otherworldly."² So dominant in this model is the idea of *holiness* that all other interests pale to insignificance.³
- Christ of Culture: Culture is generally good and the Church should accommodate what is "best" in culture for Christian ends. If the former model operates wholly from the standpoint of supernaturally acquired "new law," Niebuhr

²H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 50th anniversary expanded ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), pp. xlv, 72.

³The Amish serve as ideal examples, or perhaps one of several monastic sects especially prevalent in the medieval church.

explains, this model operates wholly on the basis of “natural law” that subsumes Christ within itself. Those adhering to this model “choose the imperative of *love* as the essential commandment in the gospel,” emphasizing assimilation over separation.⁴

Having established these poles, Niebuhr continues with three distinguishable “median types” that fall between the positions just described. These recognize that Christ and culture represent two strands of authority that can neither be ignored nor absorbed one into the other. Niebuhr identifies three of these median types, which he describes as synthesist, conversionist, and dualist.⁵ He expands these further as follows:

- Christ Above Culture: For synthesists, the “natural law” acquired by human reason is an incomplete preparatory to “new law.” The good that culture possesses independently of Christ must be cultivated by Christ’s higher ethic until the latter is completely embraced. Emphasis here is on *nurture* into a fully-orbed embrace of Christianity’s “upper story.”⁶
- Christ Transforming Culture: For conversionists, “natural law” is a legitimate concept, but, when detached from God, becomes so hopelessly “disordered by reason and culture” as to be incongruent with “new law” values and inadequate in aiding in the apprehension of the new order.⁷ In order for “natural law” to have any value, it must be interpreted through the lens of Christ. Christ must thus be integrated (in some expressions, forcibly) into *all* arenas of the natural order, including both private and public, individual and corporate.⁸
- Christ and Culture in Paradox: The dualist center of Niebuhr’s taxonomy is the most difficult to isolate and define. It recognizes that the “natural law” of culture, even though laced

⁴Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. xlviii, emphasis mine. Classic liberalism is the outstanding example.

⁵Ibid., p. x.

⁶The obvious example is Thomistic Romanism, though shades of this understanding also penetrate many historically Protestant state-church arrangements (esp. those that deny a strictly regenerate membership), from the Magisterial Reformation to the present.

⁷Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. liii.

⁸Examples here include Augustine (sometimes), but most especially the post-millennial lights of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and theonomists/reconstructionists in the present day.

with corruption, retains legitimate value, but posits something of an impenetrable barrier between the metaphysical demands of the “new law” (the gospel) and the physical demands of “natural law.” A Christian is simultaneously tugged by both forces, the tug of “new law” keeping him from total worldliness, and the tug of “natural law” keeping him from total other-worldliness.⁹

Carson's Critique of Niebuhr

What, then, can be said of Niebuhr's taxonomical approach? The short answer is that Carson has several reservations about it. The following represents a summary of Carson's more significant criticisms.

First, Carson is rightly convinced that Niebuhr's theological commitments threaten to abort the discussion from the very start. Niebuhr aims at comprehensiveness in his discussion and is successful—too successful. Niebuhr's greatest strength, “that his analysis embraces Catholics and Protestants, East and West, examples from the Fathers, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the modern period, conservatives and liberals, mainstream believers (whatever they are in any period), and sectarians,” is also his greatest weakness.¹⁰ Stated generally, the “Christ” in Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* is broader than Scripture allows. Stated more specifically, there really should be no room in this conversation for anomalies such as “‘Christian’ Gnosticism” or “‘Christian’ liberalism,”¹¹ and by recognizing these, Niebuhr indulges in confusing superfluity at points. In fact, Carson questions whether one of Niebuhr's taxonomic categories (Christ of Culture) has any legitimacy at all when critically analyzed in light of Scripture.¹²

Second, Carson finds Niebuhr's taxonomy both excessively partitioned and too reductionist: “Niebuhr's typology offers his five types as slightly idealized competing options. Yet this emphasis on choosing from among the options does not square with the canonical function of Scripture.”¹³ No one ascribes purely to any one of these types, and those who claim to do so are self-deceived. As a result, Niebuhr is obliged to force historical figures into the various types as so many

⁹Karl Barth is the obvious representative of this view, but the breadth and fluidity of this type is such that Niebuhr also includes in it figures such as Luther, who was very nearly conversionist in Niebuhr's taxonomy, but is included here because he entertained little optimism about the successful reclamation of broad culture.

¹⁰ Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, p. 31.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 32–36.

¹² Ibid., pp. 36, 205.

¹³ Ibid., p. 206.

square pegs into round holes. Carson concludes that "Niebuhr's five-fold typology, as influential as it has been, simply will not do."¹⁴ Instead of viewing these types as "alternatives that believers are welcome to choose and reject," Carson opines, these types should be regarded as "imbedded in a still larger and more cohesive understanding of the relationship between Christ and culture, such that the four or five options of Niebuhr's typology should be thought of as nothing more than possible emphases within a more comprehensive integrated whole."¹⁵ Vast global differences in public sentiment toward Christianity, government stances, historical baggage, and other aspects of culture render the selection of one of Niebuhr's types as a "master model" an exercise in reductionism.

A third charge that Carson levels against Niebuhr is neglect of the canonical plotline of biblical theology. While Carson praises Niebuhr for seeking biblical examples for his taxonomy, he is concerned that Niebuhr (1) sets the biblical figures at odds with one another and (2) reads too much of his own modern theological agenda back into the NT.¹⁶ Carson segues from Niebuhr's misuse of canonical theology to one of his own most insightful contribution to the discussion—the role of "turning points" in the biblical plotline as determinative in establishing an integrated theology of culture. Carson assigns some fifteen pages to this topic, working through creation and the fall, Israel and the Law, Christ and redemption, the establishment of the new covenant, and the consummation as critical elements in establishing the relationship of Christians to culture.¹⁷ Too much emphasis on the fall coupled with too little on creation/redemption results in a "Christ against culture" stance; too much emphasis on the church/state marriage established in the Mosaic code and too little on the new order established after the death of Christ results in a "Christ above culture" stance; too much emphasis on the new covenant coupled with too little on the consummation results in a "Christ transforming culture" stance; and simultaneous neglect of *all* the biblical turning points results in the "Christ of culture" approach that Carson doubts is Christian at all. Only a careful balance of these turning points will yield the integrated approach that Carson advances.¹⁸

Fourth, Carson chastens Niebuhr for not accounting for post-modern theology in his typology. Of course, Niebuhr can scarcely be

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁶ For instance, Carson accuses Niebuhr of so over-realizing John's eschatology that John is no longer looking to a future cataclysm but to a present renovation as the great hope of the Christian Church (*ibid.*, pp. 37–38).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 44–59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–87.

blamed for failing to comment on a system that had not yet emerged when he made his contribution (and Carson realizes this); nonetheless, the failure of his taxonomy to account for postmodernism reveals that Niebuhr's taxonomy is not as timeless and comprehensive as it purports to be. Thus Carson's approach in his treatment of postmodernism on pages 87–113 is not so much a continuation of Niebuhr as it is a correction. One might go so far as to say that Carson's is a corrective informed at least by elements of the very postmodernism that it seeks to address (which is not necessarily a bad thing). Gone are the rigid categories so typical of modern thinking, and in its place is a more fluid approach that is more selectively attuned to the individual cultures in which it is lived out. This is not to say that culture is writing Carson's theology for him, but rather that his approach is much more *occasional* than Niebuhr's. Much as the epistolary literature is occasional, emphasizing one or another point of theology to meet the respective situational needs of the addressees, so also Carson proposes that the believer's response to culture may adjust in emphasis based on the individual demands of his specific culture. Thus a repressive culture might evoke a more "Christ against culture" response, while a culture founded on Judeo-Christian ethics might suggest a more "Christ of culture" response (though never completely so). Much of the fourth and fifth chapters of *Christ and Culture Revisited*, in fact, is a demonstration of what this more fluid, integrated model looks like when implemented in light of the variegated faces of the "state" in the church/state aspect of the relationship of Christ to culture.

Fifth, and as an entree into the next section, Carson suggests that Niebuhr sometimes equivocates in his use of terms. The "Christ" of *Christ and Culture* usually points to the biblical person of Christ as a source of authority competing with culture. However, sometimes the "Christ" seems to include the idea of *church* or even the of *Christians* or *Christianity*, depending on the locus of Christian authority in a given conception of "Christ." *Culture* is also a point of equivocation in Niebuhr, sometimes pointing to an elitist understanding of culture, sometimes to an entity totally separate from the church, and still other times to an entity of which the church is inevitably a part. It is to these questions that we now turn.

Defining Christ, Culture and the Audience in Niebuhr and Carson

Definitions are of extraordinary importance in any discussion, and they are particularly so in this one. In fact, as the terms are defined precisely, the solution to the tension of Christ and culture begins to emerge almost without any further comment. By the two terms *Christ* and *Culture* Niebuhr is "not so much talking about the

relationship between Christ and culture, as between two sources of authority as they compete within culture, namely Christ (however he is understood within the paradigms of mainstream Christendom) and every other source of authority divested of Christ (though Niebuhr is thinking primarily of secular or civil authority rather than the authority claimed by competing religions).¹⁹ Of course, since all true Christians know they must obey Christ implicitly, the discussion quickly devolves to how Christians are to relate to the other, competing source of authority (viz., culture); it helps, however, to note that this was not the primary question that Niebuhr was asking and answering.

Having noted this, several questions remain unanswered. Firstly, as raised above, we must answer the question of *Christ*, or more expressly, the locus of Christian authority for believers living today. For Niebuhr there is not a single answer to this question: for some it is Scripture, for others the organized church, for others it is the Christ event as it is individually experienced and assimilated. For fundamentalists and other conservative evangelicals for which this article is intended the overwhelming answer is that Scripture is the *norma normans non normata* (lit., the “norming” norm that is never “normed”—the Reformers’ designation for the highest source of authority that bows to no other source). And for the present discussion, this seems to be adequate. For Niebuhr, though, the answer is not so dogmatic.²⁰

This brings us to the second and more significant question of the identity of *culture*—and Carson discusses this idea at length in both his first and third chapters. The term itself comes from the Latin *colere*, meaning to “cultivate” or “tend,” and thus has to do in its most basic sense with the selection and cultivation of societal values. Based on this basic etymological observation, being “cultured” historically stands for the embrace of a given society’s most treasured values and greatest refinements. This “elitist” understanding of *culture* is only faintly in view for Niebuhr, and not at all for Carson. Nonetheless, Carson finds in this understanding of *culture* a fact that is extremely important to the discussion—and one that is in serious danger of being lost in our postmodernist society—namely, that the religious values that mark a given culture may be good or evil and, consequently, that some cultures may be better or worse than others.²¹ Cultural

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁰ Though other proposed “norms” are legion, Wesley’s quadrilateral of four competing norms (Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience) seem to summarize the available options that Niebuhr is envisioning.

²¹ Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, pp. 71–75. Of all the observations that Carson makes, this is perhaps the most scandalous to the postmodernist mind that dominates the world in which we live. Cultures are good and bad, *not neutral*, and it

studies have for decades beat the postmodernist drum of neutrality, seeking to remove all values distinctions in politics, religion, ethics, the arts, and civility generally, and any valid theology of culture must resist this. Some cultures borrow substantially from the Christian worldview (sometimes consciously and deliberately, but more often in subconscious response to the latent influence of common grace that envelops all of God's creation) and others do not, and this factor is singularly vital in determining how a Christian is to relate to his culture. This is not an expression of elitism, but a simple acknowledgement of the biblical truth that thoroughly secularized cultures (those that self-consciously purge all vestiges of special and common grace from their values structures) are inferior to those that have resisted secularization (Prov 14:34). And while I would like to have seen Carson develop this idea further, I laud the fact that he has broken from prevailing secular anthropologist understandings of culture that divorce culture from its essentially religious roots.

Having said all this, I was a bit disappointed that the formal definitions of *culture* which Carson adopts do not adequately capture this important point. Carson begins with the generic definition "the set of values broadly shared by some subset of the human population," a basic definition that Carson rightly regards as insufficiently "tightened."²² Two additional definitions emerge as superior for Carson, the first of which he adopts for its "succinctness and clarity," and the second which he describes as the "most important seminal definition."²³ They are respectively as follows:

The culture concept...denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.²⁴

and

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as

is the specific values treasured by a given culture that make that society good or bad. For a treatment of this topic that I have found extremely helpful in the regard, see Roy B. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, 2nd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

²² Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, p. 1.

²³ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 89.

conditioning elements of further action.²⁵

I find the first of these definitions (Geertz's) particularly troubling because the idea of religious values is completely absent. The second (Kroeber and Kluckhohn's) improves on Geertz, though the identity of these values as *religious* is, I think, a key omission. Culture is a pattern of mutually shared *and religious* social values, and this is a vital element needs to be emphasized.

Of course, very few religious values are mutually shared by *all* members of a given society, and this is where the rub comes in. Believers live in a broad culture (what Christ denominates "the world"²⁶) that inevitably *includes* them (i.e., believers are *in* the world) but do not share identical values with the world (i.e., believers are not *of* the world). But to make things even more complex, we note that some cultures that reject Christ ironically borrow *some* Christian values due to common grace.²⁷ Additionally, cultures sometimes exhibit cultural *expressions* that are externally identical to Christian ones, but which flow from religious *values* that are intrinsically non-Christian.²⁸ These complexities (and others like them) make the identification of a master model of cultural engagement and the concept of *worldliness* very difficult.

Having identified the two vying loci of authority, *Christ* and *culture*, we turn to a third question we must ask of Niebuhr and Carson before we can fully understand their discussions, namely the identity of their audience—the party who answers to these two sources of authority. It might seem obvious that the answer is "Christians," but

²⁵ A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge MA: The Museum, 1952), p. 181 (there are two slight variations between this definition and the one that Carson used, which I assume may be attributed to his use of the Random House edition of the same work, which I did not have in my possession).

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 32.

²⁷ Nearly universal laws against murder stem from the shared value of the sanctity of human life over all other forms of life—a value shared by all cultures (in direct conflict with evolutionary presuppositions, we might add) for no discernable reason other than God's common grace whereby God writes his law on their hearts, causing them to "do instinctively the things of the Law" (Rom 2:14–15, NASB).

²⁸ For instance, secular environmentalists operate from premises such as the non-existence of a God who created and preserves his universe, the intrinsic equality (or even inferiority) of mankind to the rest of the material world, and the overwhelming responsibility of mankind for the unaided preservation of the planet. These are silly cultural values that often issue in silly cultural expressions. Nonetheless, while rightly dismissing these silly values, Christians must not lose sight of the fact that in Genesis 2 God gave to man the earth as a sort of stewardship and assigned him the task of participating in God's preserving work. As a result, it is possible that Christians might share at least *some* environmental concerns with secularists, all the while positing radically different values as underlayment for those concerns.

as Carson points out, it is not that simple. At some points Niebuhr seems to be targeting individual Christians, at others the Church as an organized body. Carson does not restrict his own discussion to one group or the other, but clearly articulates the tension and correctly incises that a sound theology of cultural engagement for individual Christians should not look the same as a sound theology of cultural engagement for the church.²⁹ Carson sides with Abraham Kuyper and Darryl Hart in noting that the bulk of social action directed toward those outside the community of believers is not properly “*the church’s* mission, under the direction of the church’s leaders, [but] it is certainly the obligation of *Christians*.”³⁰ “Christ” and “Culture” exert pressure disparately on the *church* and *Christians* respectively, and, as Carson correctly observes, any valid theology of cultural engagement must have at least these two prongs—no single model can uniformly govern both.

On Carson and Critical Thinking

The fourth chapter of Carson’s work, “Secularism, Democracy, Freedom, and Power,” is not introduced as well as it might be, perhaps, but once the point of the chapter emerges, it serves as one of the more fascinating and helpful ones in the book. If I can summarize its purpose, I would say it functions as something of a case study in critical/philosophical thinking on some rather significant cultural issues. Carson draws on “four huge cultural forces: the seduction of secularization, the mystique of democracy, the worship of freedom, and the lust for power” as topics ripe for abuse by Christians living in the confines of American culture.³¹ Drawing on his extensive knowledge of American, French, and Canadian political culture, Carson calls on his readers to thinking globally, but more importantly, biblically, about these cultural forces.

Taking the “mystique of democracy” as a representative point of discussion in this critique, we find Carson critiquing the American tendency to regard democracy as a form of government morally superior to other forms of government (and especially to governments with power concentrated in just one or a few persons). So much is this the case that the idea of democracy sometimes rises to the level of a Christian ideal—despite the absence of the idea in Scripture. In part, this is because many believers have succumbed to the liberal idea (in both a theological and political sense) that while specific men may be evil, man is generally good. As such, placing the locus of power in the

²⁹ See esp. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, pp. 151–54, 172, 179, etc.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152, but see what seems to me a curious inconsistency on p. 202.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

whole of society is superior to concentrating it in a few. But as Carson notes, when a society becomes thoroughly secularized, democracy can develop into something of a trap for Christians for which there is no hope of a coup to bring relief. In this case, democracy proves to be a scourge to the Church. In secular democracies Christians tend to surrender religious freedom, bit by bit, to the secular, democratic "state," but do so in such a way that Christians actually end up approving that loss. Secularist democracy thus relentlessly squeezes Christianity—not into non-existence, but into submission to its ethos. And as Carson notes (borrowing from Luke Timothy Johnson), "to the degree that...Christianity has assimilated itself to the dominant ethos, reasons for anyone joining it are harder to come by."³²

This specific disregard for the differences between shifting American values and fixed Christian values is but one example of the many subtle forces that dull Christian thinking. To counter these, Carson presses the need for believers to engage in *discernment*, that is, in critical, analytical, and philosophical thinking and living within their respective cultures. His is a call not only to evaluate specific cultural *practices* but also to discern the religious *values* that lie underneath, for it is in the latter (not the former) that the real clash of Christ and culture usually occurs.

It is largely for this reason, I think, that Carson reacts so severely to Niebuhr's idea of a "master model" of cultural engagement. Carson wants a theology of cultural engagement that operates on the level of discerned *values*, not observed *practices*—a model that operates from a collection of principles, not a stone tablet of rules—and Niebuhr's categories are a bit too rigid for Carson. The believer's response to culture must be twofold: not only must it include a surface response to external cultural laws, patterns, and practices, but also a second, more profound response to internal, underlying religious and cultural values—responses that, paradoxically, may conflict.³³ Further, God's uneven investiture of common grace in society is such that the responses of believers to culture differ substantially from culture to

³²Ibid., p. 118, cited from Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 64.

³³For instance, the *practice* of men wearing beards is an intrinsically good thing. I can say this confidently in view of the fact the Jesus himself sported one, and the fact that God regulated and even mandated the growth of beards during a large block of human history. However, in 1960s and 1970s America, the growth of beards was overwhelmingly connected to anti-authoritarian and unbiblical cultural *values*. And so a broad swath of conservative organizations (both secular and religious) prohibited the *practice* of wearing of beards in the interest of battling unbiblical *values*. Today, the *practice* of wearing beards is only minimally connected with anti-authoritarian and unbiblical *values* (if at all) and so there is a substantial relaxation of this prohibition occurring today.

culture: believers must sometimes resist the authority of culture as opposed to Christ, may sometimes find themselves cobelligerents with one expression of culture over another, and still other times may find Christ in lock step with culture on a given issue. Any master model of cultural engagement will be extraordinarily difficult to construct.

Response and Proposal

In the main my quibbles with Carson's treatment are minor, and are as follows: (1) I find Carson a bit harder on Niebuhr than is merited, since Niebuhr admits at the outset of his work that his typology consists of "relatively concrete models of combinations of interests or convictions," constructs "to which no individual wholly conforms"³⁴ (thus acceding to one of Carson's major critiques fifty years before the fact). Niebuhr seems to view his types as something of a continuum with clusters of combined interests, and freely admits that no one is ever locked precisely into any one of his taxonomical boxes. So while Carson's observation that the response of the believer to culture is exceedingly complex and its expression (at least on the surface) often inconsistent, his criticism of Niebuhr seems a bit more severe than is wont. (2) I am convinced that Carson's eschatology is more "realized" than Scripture permits.³⁵ Consequently, his emphasis on new covenant and kingdom themes is more pronounced than my own, and his anticipation of cultural renewal more optimistic. As Carson himself notes, differences in emphasis on the major "turning points" of biblical theology lie at the heart of the distinction between responses to culture—and Carson's emphasis on realized eschatology is no exception to this observation. To be fair, it must be noted that Carson emphatically insists that there is too much "not yet" in the unfolding of the kingdom and new covenant to allow for "hunts for utopia."³⁶ Nonetheless the substantial "already" emphasis of Carson's theology of the kingdom energizes a measure of hope for cultural renewal in the present era today that is absent in the traditional dispensational model of the kingdom to which I subscribe. (3) Finally, while I agree with Carson that a consistent "master model" of cultural engagement cannot be crafted on the level of *practice*, I am convinced there are enough guiding principles to generate a sort of values-driven cohesion to the Christian's response to culture.

The question of Christ and culture is not, of course, a simple one. Some approach the question (as Niebuhr does) with hopes of

³⁴ *Christ and Culture*, p. xxviii.

³⁵ See esp. his *Christ and Culture Revisited*, pp. 52–58, 170–71, 218, 228.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

determining the believer's response to various state authorities. Others are seeking to weight the believer's social and evangelistic responsibilities toward "those without." Still others ask the question searching for guidance on what cultural practices may be suitable for incorporation into Christian conduct, education, and worship. Complicating things still further is the fact that some approach the question wondering how Christians should respond to something demonstrably evil in culture, others how they should respond to something demonstrably good in culture, and still others are wondering whether a given practice in culture is good, evil, or neutral. Obviously, we have here more issues than we can possibly address adequately in the space allotted. At the risk of ignoring several of these concerns, I am going to hone in on one of these areas, viz., guidance on what cultural practices may be suitable for incorporation into Christian conduct, education, and worship, as the focus of the last few paragraphs of this article.

Up to this point I have been speaking somewhat abstractly about two levels of cultural engagement—the level of practice and the level of religious values. I have noted that cultural engagement on the level of practice sometimes appears erratic, but that a corresponding theology of cultural engagement at the values level can explain those inconsistencies and create a coherent "master model" of cultural engagement. To bring this abstract idea into the concrete I appeal to the Apostle Paul's exchange with the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 8–10. In this example, note that the *cultural practice* in view is eating meat; the *religious value* in view is pluralism/idolatry. In these chapters, Paul's commands on the level of practice are, on the surface, erratic: sometimes he encourages eating meat, other times he discourages it, and still other times he outright forbids it. But when we delve into the level of religious *values*, Paul's variegated response makes perfect sense. The practice of eating meat is (1) an intrinsically unnecessary thing (i.e., we have no biblical command to eat meat) and also (2) an intrinsically good thing, a gift from the gracious hand of God (Gen 9:3; Acts 10:15). Since this intrinsically good practice in Paul's day was sometimes connected with the pagan *value* of pluralism and even outright idolatry, however, Paul proposes a complex response to the *practice* of eating meat:

- 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).

In this exchange lies, in seed form, a basic theology of cultural engagement that can be extrapolated to account for nearly any cultural encounter. Although Paul's comments could be interpreted simplistically as an argument for separation on the basis of association, I think something more profound is at issue here.

- 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.³⁷ Again, we should expect that our culture, being the product of its own depraved religious values, will contain much of this "worldliness."³⁸
- 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

³⁷Note here that I disallow any neutral "center" that is neither good nor evil. Practices flow from values and can never be detached therefrom. Thus while certain practices may be good *or* evil (depending upon the value that undergirds beneath them), they can never be neither good *nor* evil.

³⁸By *worldliness* I intend not just active disobedience and explicit rejection of God and his Word, but the practice of ordering one's life apart from any active awareness of him—failing to acknowledge God in all of our thoughts, and adopting the same values as the unregenerate world. In the words of Joel Beeke, worldliness is "human nature without God" (*Overcoming the World* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2005], p. 5; cf. also C. J. Mahaney, *Worldliness* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008], pp. 27–28).

secular society.³⁹

Seeing this variegated response, it is easy to see why Carson concludes that there is no single master model. It would appear that any single activity (e.g., eating meat) may be in one set of circumstances subject to the "Christ of Culture" rubric, in another to the "Christ against Culture" rubric, and in yet another the "Christ and Culture in Paradox" rubric. Further, whether or not the result is intentional, any one of these responses may serve to transform culture. Niebuhr's categories do, admittedly break down if adopting just one of them must be called upon to meet all cultural circumstances. I am not sure that this means that there is no master model, but it does suggest that our master model is more complex than any that Niebuhr offers.

Carson's more or less consistent praise of Abraham Kuyper and also of Klaas Schilder's variation of Kuyper's methodology suggest that Carson finds this family of cultural models closer to the "master model" than any of Niebuhr's five taxons. I resonate with this favorable treatment (with some reservations stemming from some of the postmillennial implications that arise here), and I propose that a revival in interest in their dusty ideas is well worth our time.

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,"⁴⁰ 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.

³⁹For instance, Christians may readily embrace laws against murder (laws that are incongruous with evolutionary values), investing them with the theological value necessary to their coherence (viz., the biblical creation of man in God's image). So in this sense, there can be a "cultural cobelligerence" with unbelievers—at least on an individual Christian level.

⁴⁰Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, p. 118.