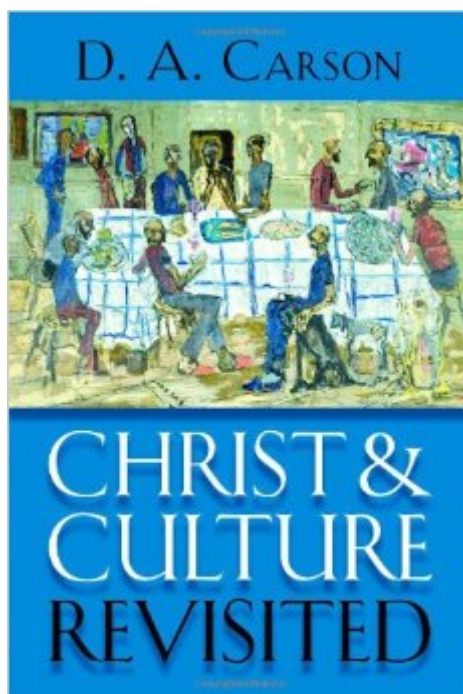


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# Christ And Culture Revisited



## Synopsis

Called to live in the world, but not to be of it, Christians must maintain a balancing act that becomes more precarious the further our culture departs from its Judeo-Christian roots. How should members of the church interact with such a culture, especially as deeply enmeshed as most of us have become? D. A. Carson applies his masterful touch to this problem. He begins by exploring the classic typology of H. Richard Niebuhr with its five Christ-culture options. Carson proposes that these disparate options are in reality one still larger vision. Using the Bible's own story line and the categories of biblical theology, he clearly lays out that unifying vision. Carson acknowledges the helpfulness of Niebuhr's grid and similar matrices but warns against giving them canonical force. More than just theoretical, *Christ and Culture Revisited* is also designed practically to help Christians untangle current messy debates on living in the world. Carson emphasizes that the relation between Christ and culture is not limited to an either/or cultural paradigm -- Christ against culture or Christ transforming culture. Instead Carson offers his own paradigm in which all the categories of biblical theology must be kept in mind simultaneously to inform the Christian worldview. While many other books on culture interact with Niebuhr, none of them takes anything like the biblical-theological approach adopted here. Groundbreaking and challenging, *Christ and Culture Revisited* is a tour de force.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

How shall Christ and Culture interact? The question is universal. From Christians hiding in China, to

the power and majesty of Catholicism, to the Moral Majority in America, to the reclusive Amish communities in Pennsylvania, the Church has struggled with the correct understanding of how faith applies to local context. For years, various groups have fit themselves into one of H. Richard Niebuhr's five categories; Christ against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ the Transformer of Culture. D.A. Carson's, "Christ and Culture Revisited," critiques Niebuhr, and offers a more thoughtful and orthodox path forward. It is an excellent bird's eye view of a contentious topic, painted with broad but well-researched strokes. In this review I describe its six chapters, draw out the, "takeaway," ideas, insert a few notes, and give my overall thoughts. Summary Chapter 1 explains and reviews Niebuhr's, "Christ and Culture." Niebuhr's categories cast a fairly wide net, and Carson's analysis begins to narrow it. He argues that at least one category (Christ of Culture) necessitates a heretical view of Christianity, and as such is not acceptable as a category. Chapter 2 continues critiquing Niebuhr by applying biblical theology. Carson evaluates Niebuhr's strengths and weaknesses, handling of Scripture, assignment of historical figures, and understanding of canon. He also makes a key argument; to suggest that there are multiple views of Christ and Culture and that individual groups can rightly choose just one is incorrect.

In 1951 H. Richard Niebuhr penned his now classic volume, *Christ and Culture*. In it he sought to explore the "enduring problem" of the "many-sided debate about Christianity and civilization". In an attempt to come to terms with this complex and important issue, he presented various models of this relationship. The result was his famous fivefold reply: Christ against Culture; Christ of Culture; Christ above Culture; Christ and Culture in Paradox; and Christ the Transformer of Culture. Each of these models he describes in detail, and he notes both strengths and weaknesses to the five options. He suggests that believers will have to make up their own minds as to which is the preferred option. In Carson's new volume he seeks to carry on from where Niebuhr left off. He begins by assessing his work and the five models. He rightly notes that for Niebuhr the real issue is not so much how Christianity relates to culture, but "two sources of authority as they compete within society, namely Christ ... and every other source of authority divested of Christ". And Niebuhr is especially thinking of secular or civil authority here, Carson reminds us. Carson also notes some weaknesses in Niebuhr's important volume. He did a good job of aligning various historical figures with the five models, but sometimes the fit is far from precise. For example, while Augustine or Calvin may well fit in the transformationist model, they do so only partially. And Tertullian cannot consistently be seen as fitting in the opposition ("against") model. And so on. Carson then discusses the biblical plotline,

and what are some nonnegotiable elements of the biblical worldview. He rightly notes that we do very much have a responsibility to our surrounding culture.

This is a rich, revealing, and satisfying survey of how believers relate to the culture in which they live. In the first chapter, Carson adopts Clifford Geertz's definition of culture, which is "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols ...by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life (p. 2)." He also revisits Richard Niebuhr's five constructs which he finds in scripture: Christ against Culture, the Christ of culture, Christ Above Culture, Christ and Culture in paradox, and Christ the Transformer of culture. In chapter two, Carson concludes that the second option is probably unbiblical and that the other four constructs can be true in different times and places, and that it is better to see these as working together rather than four buffet style pick and choose options. Carson also mentions some non-negotiable teachings in the biblical storyline that must be the foundation of any understanding of how the Christian relates to culture: 1. God made everything good, but that this is a fallen world because of original sin inherited through Adam and Eve 2. Jesus came to inaugurate the New Covenant and to die for our sins and rise again to be the king of the universe 3. There is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be feared. Chapter three discusses Christ, culture and postmodernism. While Carson acknowledges that culture colors the way we perceive truth, this does not support the postmodern idea that we cannot know truth as truth. We can acknowledge with emergent church leaders that all of our knowledge is interpreted, and also agree with scripture that truth is important and reliable. There is also a chapter about the Christian and secularism, power, democracy, and freedom.

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