

Note: This Work has been made available by the authority of the copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research and may not be copied or reproduced except as permitted by the copyright laws of Canada without the written authority from the copyright owner.

Neufeldt-Fast, Arnold. Review of Craig Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007). *Connection* 13, no 1 (2007): 19.

Book Review

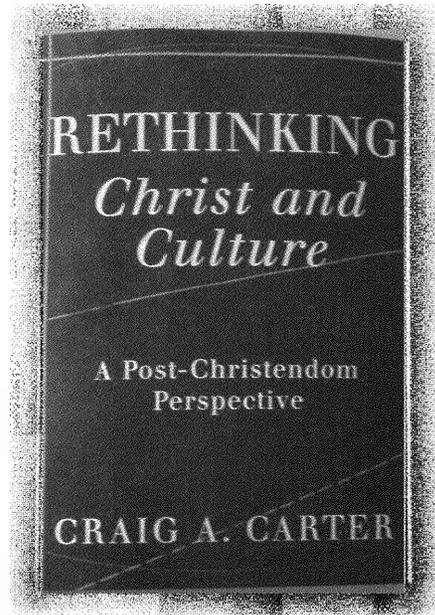
Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective

Dr. Craig Carter, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Tyndale University College, has published an original, prophetic and pragmatic call to the Church to recognize its new post-Christendom location, to repent of its Christendom leanings and to embrace new options of faithfulness and mission to the world.

Carter's book makes the convincing case that the Church is in a lengthy but epochal cultural shift, being transposed from a position of privilege and influence to one of marginality. The Christendom model assumes that Christians are responsible for building and sustaining culture and therefore, Christians must be "realistic" and make compromises in applying a perfect Christ to "fallen" culture. Carter celebrates the demise of this paradigm and argues that the model represents a perversion of the Gospel, a parody of the Church and a betrayal of Jesus' teachings.

Carter's main achievement is to thoroughly dismantle the most influential analysis of Church and culture in the 20th century, namely H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951). Niebuhr provided a typology of ways which churches have related to culture: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture.

Both liberal and conservative forms of Christianity have embraced this portrayal of the range of possible options for engaging culture. Yet Carter shows that this typology presupposes Christendom culture, that is, a society in which



Church and civil government are united in their adherence to the Christian faith. However, according to Carter, this presupposition is not biblically justified, theologically sound, pastorally responsible or evangelistically effective.

Consequently, Western churches have themselves become transformed by the fragmenting and individualistic forces of their culture. Both liberal and conservative churches are dead ends insofar as they dutifully accept the place that modern Christendom designates for them (i.e., as props for the morale of the nation-state and as consolation to individuals in private). Carter's proposal is that the Church's goal is not the transformation of society, as Niebuhr assumed, but bearing witness to the



truth that in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the world has already been transformed.

For more than 20 years, Carter has been reading and reflecting on the writings of Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John

Howard Yoder and Lesslie Newbigin, among others. From these great teachers, Carter learned how to read the Bible, the Christian tradition and Western culture. Arguably these theologians were ahead of their time, sensing the demise of Christendom, which is only happening now. Carter's book presents the best of their insights at a time when the Church is broadly cognizant of the crisis and opportunity. In this new context, Carter advises that the purpose of the Church is to proclaim the coming of God's reign and to embody this witness in its own communal life—and this cannot be done with a Christendom strategy.

Carter's book is bold in style, carefully argued with many biographical and historical examples, guided by an informed and passionately held biblical vision for the Church of Jesus Christ. This book is for not only for academics, but for all who live their faith in the classroom of culture and seek to make sense of it all. Carter is a reliable guide, whose goal it is to inspire each reader to a more thoroughly "sanctified imagination" of what the Church can be.

—Reviewed by Dr. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, Assistant Professor of Theology at Tyndale Seminary.