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Rethinking
Christ and Culture

A Post-Christendom Perspective

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Preface

I hope that this book will be useful for professors who wish to help their students grapple with the challenges of the postmodern, post-Christian society in which we live. I also hope it will be of some help to ordinary Christians whose classroom is the culture and whose daily lives consist of trying to make sense of it. Most of all, however, I hope it will spark the imaginations of those creative, risk-taking church leaders who are on the cutting edge of ministry today. We live in a time when old paradigms are falling apart and new ones are emerging only gradually, and our greatest need is for a more fertile and more thoroughly sanctified imagination.

I am aware that the thesis of this book—that we must move from a Christendom to a post-Christendom way of thinking about the Christ and culture problem—will be judged by many individuals to be far too radical for their tastes. That is perfectly understandable so far as I am concerned. I know that not everyone feels the pressure of the post-Christendom trend equally at the same time. Western Christendom was not built in a single day, and it will take a long time for it to die out everywhere. So I hope it does not sound arrogant when I say that I have not written this book for yesterday, but for tomorrow and, perhaps, for today.

Although I have not written this book for yesterday, I have no doubt that ancient wisdom is the key to future faithfulness. Despite all our technological gadgets and our late-modern pretensions, there is truly nothing new under the sun. The church of Jesus Christ has been in situations like our present one before, and all the temptations we face are recycled ones. The devil has hardly any imagination and no real creativity (which must gall him to no end!). Only God can really make all things new. So we need to detach ourselves from our immediate context long enough to look at other times when the church has faced the kinds of problems we face now, and we need to learn both how to do it and how *not* to do it.

I am convinced that the future for the church lies in taking a radical approach and refusing to be either liberal or conservative. The church in North America

has been divided into two wings, liberal and conservative, for over a century now, and I regard both liberalism and conservatism as dead ends. Scratch a liberal and you find a fundamentalist in reaction against his or her upbringing. Both are severely compromised by the Enlightenment project of autonomous human reason as the highest authority, of science and technology as the way of salvation, and of progress as the inevitable destiny of the human race. This kind of faith is a secularized form of a heretical deviation from Christianity, and it is dying.

I grew up in fundamentalism and have watched many of my peers journey toward a more liberal expression of the Christian faith. But for some reason, even as I became discontented with the anti-intellectualism, the lack of social concern, the separatism, the individualism, the shallowness, and the legalism of my fundamentalist background, I was never tempted by liberalism. I seemed instinctively to know that it was too much like what I was troubled by in my own background, even though it tried its best to appear different. Indeed, it tries too hard and protests, I think, far too much. I have come to see that both conservative and liberal Christians have made peace with modernity their own way and have, for the most part, accepted dutifully the place that modern Christendom designates for religion—as a prop for the morale of the nation-state in public and as a consolation to individuals in private.

One often hears an author say that writing a book is a lonely process, but that has not been my experience. The stimulating conversations, loving support, and challenging interactions with students, colleagues, and friends that I have experienced while writing this book have made it extremely enjoyable. I have learned much from them, and I am grateful for their input.

But I also have found fellowship with the dead in Christ by reading the writings of the saints who have gone before, and quite often I have felt more in tune with some of them than with my contemporaries. Many times during the writing of this book I have felt inspired, challenged, and humbled by the stories of the martyrs, saints, and pilgrims who have gone before and who have borne a faithful testimony to our Lord Jesus Christ. What a diverse group they are: desert fathers, bishops, monks, nobles, tradesmen, housewives, scholars, missionaries, pietists, Anabaptists, nuns, pastors, social activists, poets, politicians, martyrs, evangelists, and educators. There have been so many incredibly diverse ways of witnessing to Christ in church history that one cannot help but be hopeful, if only we can allow our imaginations to be stimulated by their examples.

The wonderful thing about the Christian faith is that this is not an alienating experience—to find fellowship with the dead, that is—because of the hope of resurrection. I am not merely an isolated individual living in a certain place and time cut *off* from them forever; I am part of the worldwide church of Christ of all ages. My destiny in Christ is to be part of this body of believers of all nationalities, languages, times, and places for eternity, and so a feeling of solidarity in the faith with those of past ages is more than a dream; it is a reality. The Scripture says of Abel: “And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead” (Hebrews 11:4).

But the living speak too, and several living individuals deserve particular mention here. First, I want to thank Jeff Greenman, now of Wheaton College, but formerly my administrative colleague at Tyndale University College and Seminary. He and I sketched out the basic plan for this book on a piece of scrap paper in O'Hare Airport while we were on our way home from a Society of Christian Ethics meeting many years ago. Jeff has also been a constant source of encouragement as this project crawled along. He read the next-to-final version of the manuscript and made some excellent suggestions. I listened to everything he said and tried to incorporate his suggestions, except for a very few points where I was stubborn. No one should blame him for whatever is lacking in this book: he did everything a friend could do to make it as good as it could be.

The same goes for others who have been helpful along the way. The original inspiration for this book came from a panel discussion about the fiftieth anniversary edition of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* at the Society of Christian Ethics annual meeting and particularly from some comments by Duane Friesen on that occasion. His later article in the *Society of Christian Ethics Annual* is mentioned at the appropriate place in this book as having been very important for my thinking.

I thank many people who took time out of their busy schedules to read the manuscript and to talk to me about it. Dan Goodwin, Ted Newell, Bob Williams, Greg Maillet, Seth Crowell, Steve Carter, and Stephen Dempster, who are all faculty members at Atlantic Baptist University, spent an evening discussing it with me. Myron B. Penner also read it, and our conversation at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in November of 2005 was extremely important to me in terms of seeing connections between postmodernism and a post-Christendom perspective. Jonathan Wilson also took time to read most of the manuscript, and I thank him for our good conversation at AAR that year as well.

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I would like to thank Bradley Longard for his help with the creation of the index. I also want to thank my son, Stephen, for giving me a student's reaction to part of the manuscript. My oldest daughter, Rebecca Carter-Chand, read the entire manuscript and made some helpful suggestions. It has been my privilege to discuss many of the ideas in this book with her over the past decade as she

has grown up and progressed through high school, university, and graduate school. Our relationship as parent and child now has matured into a wonderful friendship, and I am delighted to dedicate this book to her with my love. To my wife, Bonnie, I once again acknowledge my gratitude and freely *confess* that I could never accomplish projects like this without her constant support, encouragement, and love.