

Carson's Critique of Niebuhr's Types

Podcast #4 in Series

James Cook 2022

Introduction

- Who is D.A. Carson?
- What we will cover in this presentation.

Introduction

- Who is D.A. Carson?
 - PhD in New Testament from Cambridge University 1975
 - He was research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.
 - He is a 'reformed' Biblical Scholar in the tradition of Calvin.
 - He has written and edited about 60 books and many articles...
 - He is presently an Emeritus Professor of New Testament and a Theologian-at-Large

Introduction

- What else we will cover in this presentation
 - How Carson defines culture.
 - Listing what Carson thinks are 6 unique factors that should shape our reflection about culture.
 - Carson's critique of Niebuhr's typologies.

Carson's Critique

- How Carson defines culture.
 - Seems to demur from the standard “high culture,” “popular or low culture” explanations
 - Sees the term 'culture' has become fairly plastic—“the set of values broadly shared by some subset of the human population.” See it as a good definition, but needs some tightening up.
 - Likes A.L. Kroeber and C Kluckhohn's definition but prefers Clifford Geertz, but what these have in common according to Carson is “...there are many cultures and they make no pretensions about assigning transcendental value to any of them.”
 - That “...all exemplifications of faith, Christian and otherwise, are necessarily expressed within forms that are cultural cannot reasonably be denied.” Dialogue goes from there...

“[T]he culture concept...denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meaning 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.”

Clifford Geertz in the *Interpretation of Cultures*, p 89.

Carson's Critique

- Introduction—6 unique factors that should shape our reflection on culture.
 - Especially Anglo-Saxon world...cannot ignore the programmatic analysis H. Richard Niebuhr.
 - Now there are diverse voices clamoring for the right to dictate what the relationship with Christ & culture ought to be.
 - Due to communication tech & immigration patterns that have made many megalopolises around the world into centers of multiculturalism, creating debates about what is “cultural” and what is “multicultural.”

Carson's Critique

- Continued: 6 unique factors that should shape our reflection on culture.
 - That has in turn precipitated debates over the relative merits of one culture over another—does one ever have the right to affirm the superiority of one culture over another? What gives religion, any religion, the right to claim its own superiority or even uniqueness?
 - In the Western world...confessional Christianity is in serious decline, meaning the *status quo* in most Western countries cannot continue unquestioned.
 - The actual history of tensions between church & state varies enormously from state to state in the Western world and beyond making it difficult to make generalizations or even discuss examples.

Carson's Critique

- Moving now to Carson's Critique of Niebuhr's Typology
 - 1) "...we reflect with gratitude on his comprehensiveness..." (a pro)
 - "...it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Niebuhr's comprehensiveness is also a deadly weakness."
 - He "...deploys some criteria to eliminate from consideration movements that he judges are beyond the pale..." Arians (and their modern counterparts), Mormons, or the followers of Thomas Münzer, but (says Carson) he does not eliminate any branch of "Christian" Gnosticism, nor any wing of "Christian" liberalism.

Carson's Critique

- Carson: "...Owing not least to the influence of Walter Bauer, many scholars have come to accept the view there was no distinction between what we now call orthodox and what we now heterodoxy (or heresy) until well into the second century.
- Orthodoxy and heresy, it is said, "...were considered valid options within nascent Christianity..."
- Carson says about Niebuhr "...Niebuhr simply seems to assume this stance...", but says Carson, Bauer's position "though still popular in some circles has become more and more difficult to defend. Gnosticism was a 2nd century development and is parasitic on 1st century theology. The NT writers themselves distinguish between orthodoxy and heresy.

Carson's Critique

- Carson thinks the same for “liberal theology” (which Niebuhr calls “culture Christianity” This is not the same as “what C.S. Lewis would call “mere Christians,” some of whom happen to hold some more-or-less liberal positions on this detail on economic policy.”
- Carson notes that Niebuhr defines them as “...[S]ociologically they may be interpreted as non-revolutionaries who find no need for positing 'cracks in time'—fall and incarnation and judgement and resurrection.” They also “reject the whole conception of a once-and-for-all act of redemption.”
- Carson notes Machen thought “...liberalism is not another denomination or any other kind of legitimate option within Christianity. Rather it is another religion...” and Carson writes “...although Niebuhr insists that since the eighteenth century Abélard's followers “have become more numerous, and what was heresy became the new orthodoxy...” this new account seems “...less compelling given liberalism's fortunes in the 21st century.”

Carson's Critique

- Carson nuances this by saying that “...there yet remain many flourishing liberal congregations” and “...[C]ertain faculties of theology and religion in universities find their loyalties in that same tradition. Worse, at least one wing of evangelicalism is constantly tempted in this direction.” (note: 'wing' is unnamed by Carson)
- The thing to see is that Carson thinks Niebuhr “...has saddled himself with at least one pattern that is not well based.”
- I think an important conclusion to Carson's critique is that he suggests there should be 4 not 5 types.
- 2) Niebuhr's handling of Scripture
 - Carson likes that Niebuhr's work gives “effort to ground most of his five patterns in the Scriptures themselves.”

Carson's Critique

- However, Carson thinks he is less successful with the 'Christ of culture' type in doing that. Carson says that Niebuhr "...pays scant attention to Scripture and then leaps to the two dominant movements, Gnosticism and liberalism, that are themselves least grounded in Scripture." (Because Carson thinks they detach themselves "...from the great turning points in the Bible's story line.")
- Carson also doesn't like Niebuhr's reading "...of the Fourth Gospel in defense of his fifth pattern", Christ the transformer.
 - Niebuhr: "...John could not say more forcefully that whatever is is good."
 - Carson: "...John could not say more forcefully that whatever the Logos *originally* made was good."

Carson's Critique

- In so making the mistake, Carson argues that Niebuhr uses certain spiritual analogies related to nature, however, even though they are metaphorically true they are misleading.
- Carson then thinks Niebuhr's misleading use of metaphorical truths is "...quietly linked..." to realized eschatology. So, "realized" in the ideal that Niebuhr is using it as a transformational approach to culture—that "...everything gets better by the grace of the gospel."
- The question is John's Gospel ultimately hoping in the progressive transformation of the world or "...in the final cataclysm..."?

Carson's Critique

- Carson does admit that Niebuhr concedes "...We are prevented from interpreting the fourth Gospel as a wholly conversionalist document, not only by its silence on many subjects but also by the fact that its universalistic note is accompanied by a particularistic tendency."
- Carson complains that "Methodologically...it is hard to see how this fifth pattern escapes the criticism that Niebuhr himself levels against various forms of liberal theology." Niebuhr wants (according to Carson) the conversionalist paradigm...to prevail, even in its pure form he finds it neither in any New Testament document, nor in any great figure of church history until F. D. Maurice..."

Carson's Critique

- Carson concludes: "...there is more to be said for this fifth pattern (the conversionist type) than there is for the second, but there is very little to be said for it in the absolute form in which Niebuhr wants it to exist and triumph.
- 3) Niebuhr's Assignment of Historical Figures
 - First concern: the way the historical figures mentioned by Niebuhr align with each of Niebuhr's five patterns, "...is sometimes problematic."
 - Carson claims that Niebuhr admits more than once that his five patterns are idealizations and that in reality people and movements are likely to pick and choose.

Carson's Critique

- For instance, Carson thinks that Tertullian is not quite "consistent in his adoption of the "Christ against culture" paradigm, while Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria are not consistent in their pursuit of the synthesist pattern..."
- He also notes that some figures appear in two or three patterns. eg. F. D. Maurice appears both as "a witness to the "Christ of culture" paradigm and as the best embodiment of the conversionist pattern ("Christ as transformer of culture)."

Carson's Critique

- 4) Niebuhr and the Canon
 - Introduction: Carson notes that Niebuhr appeals to Scripture for most of his five patterns.
 - But Carson sees the attempt fails in certain respects
 - His second pattern (Christ of culture) is certainly found in historical movements, "...but these movements are of doubtful Christian authenticity and have no warrant in the Bible."
 - Niebuhr's fifth pattern (Christ the transformer of culture) is only found "...in restricted forms in the New Testament, but certainly not in the strong form..."

Carson's Critique

- Carson alleges that Niebuhr's view is still quite common in some academic circles...what that amounts to:
 - Bible generally and NT in particular provide us with a number of discrete paradigms.
 - We are being faithful to Scripture if we, "...align our choices with any one of these paradigms, or perhaps even with some combination of them."
 - Key: "the canon's "rule" is thus not so much in the totality of the canon's voice, as in providing the boundaries of the allowable paradigms."
 - The communities are thought to be sealed off (ranging from possibly to likely) from one another.
 - Therefore, this is the reason Niebuhr thinks certain books of the NT are exemplars of certain of his patterns.

Carson's Critique

- However, Christians recognize the diversity of the Bible in general and of the NT in particular, but “...insist that the Bible as a whole constitutes the canon—and this canon’s “rule” lies in the totality of the canon’s instruction, not in providing a boundary to possible options...”
- That is the historic position of Christian theology
 - consistent with understanding that there are literary genres in the Bible
 - there is also an understanding of the changes in the covenants even though “...exactly *how* the different parts of Scripture cohere has always been a matter of considerable dispute...”

Carson's Critique

- These two views of the canon are quite different and “have an immediate bearing on our topic.”
- Carson maintains that the second view of the function of the canon is the only one that “...can be sustained.”
- Carson suggests we should not be heralding the “choose your own paradigm of Christ and culture” view.
- Carson advocates for “...a more comprehensive vision, a canon-stipulated vision, of what such relations should be...”

Carson's Critique

- We will address what Carson suggests as an alternative in the next podcast.

End