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Engaging the Culture, Changing the World: The Christian University in a Post-Christian World

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*Engaging the Culture, Changing the World:
The Christian University in a Post-Christian World*

Philip W. Eaton (2012).
Downers Grove, Illinois: MP Academic.

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Reviewed by Greg Veltman

Let me tell you a story.

Imagine a community of people living together, sharing meals, meeting weekly to discuss the Bible and their faith journeys, and working through the tough decisions of living together, striving to love each other in spite of their idiosyncrasies and short-comings, and even holding some of their money together in common.

Imagine one evening they are deep in conversation about whether they should reach out and invite neighbors over for a meal. Will the guest feel uncomfortable if we pray before the meal? What if the guests' past experience with Christians has been painful and they become angry with us? How can we do this answering the call of Jesus to love our neighbor, while also challenging them with the life Jesus calls all of us to? Ultimately, how do we live out the truth of the gospel in a culture that often seems to oppose our very way of life?

You might be thinking that this story takes place hundreds of years ago, around the time of the early church. It sounds like any number of the churches Paul was writing to in his letters. But this story is a true story of my own experience living in an intentional Christian community with college students for the past three years.

In Philip Eaton's book, *Engaging the Culture, Changing the World: The Christian University in a Post-Christian World*, he argues that the Christian University ought to be a place teaching an alternative and distinctly Christian story of the world and our role in it. This argument, while taking a different form, is similar to the story that many communities of college student are already living out that I described above. And yet, Eaton is obsessed with an enticing, but ultimately unsatisfying (and partly false) story of the world we live in, and how Christians ought to respond.

Eaton was the president of Seattle Pacific University for 15 years and has titled his book after the university's tagline. It is an opportunity for him to take pride in the work he has undertaken over the past decade. And as a former English professor, he had a great opportunity to bring out the moral meaning of some great literature as it draws out the story of dangers and promises of higher education. But while he takes on an admirable contemporary research on the importance of story and how it can lead to a better understanding of how contemporary culture works, he does not succeed in providing the vision of how an alternative story would play out at the Christian University.

58 In the first half of the book, Eaton uses the work of Stanley Fish and Friedrich Nietzsche to build a case that the contemporary decline of the university is because secular institutions of higher education have given up on the search for truth and have all become relativists that have killed God. Eaton claims that most Christians have accepted this secular vision of the university. His use of the term *post-Christian world* assumes that in the past we lived in a Christian world. This kind of argument can be dangerous, leading one to romanticize the past at the expense of the future built on the promises of God.

After spending the first 11 chapters describing our culture as godless and apathetic, Eaton attempts to get a response. He builds on the work of Leslie Newbigin in order to enhance our philosophical theology, N.T. Wright to get Christians to think about how Paul might help us respond to our culture, and James Davison Hunter to define what we are talking about when we talk about culture.

These scholars ask great questions that help the reader to think deeply about our situation, but Eaton is unable to extract their answers to the problems of our day in a way that might help reshape our lives and work toward a more faithful approach to Christian higher education. In the abstract, this book has promise and is getting at some fundamental issues of our contemporary moment, but it is hard for the reader to make the application as to what action and tasks are needed in order for us to move forward.

While I am not usually one to prioritize application at the expense of the theoretical, in the case of higher education, there are many real-life examples of alternative stories that are shaped by the Christian story that could illustrate his thesis. Where is the story of the SPU alumni who moved to Pittsburgh to get a Master's of Social Work and currently works with recovering alcoholics? Or the references to SPU staff member Jeffrey Overstreet whose books and articles on film and popular culture, and fiction writing, are extensive and brilliantly try to engage thoughtfully and critically the contemporary culture? I would imagine there are many everyday stories on the campus of SPU that would drive Eaton's point home.

Ultimately, Eaton misses the chance to tell the stories of Seattle Pacific University: the work being done at his own university by students, faculty and staff; the alumni who have taken the tagline into their vocations; and their influence on Christian higher education all over the world. While this work can spur us on to think about the culture we live in, we are left with finding our own ways to faithfully follow Jesus in all of our everyday work with college students. 

Greg Veltman, along with his wife Andrea are mentors in Calvin College's Project Neighborhood, an intentional community of college students. He is also the Research and Program Coordinator for the Student Activities Office at Calvin College.