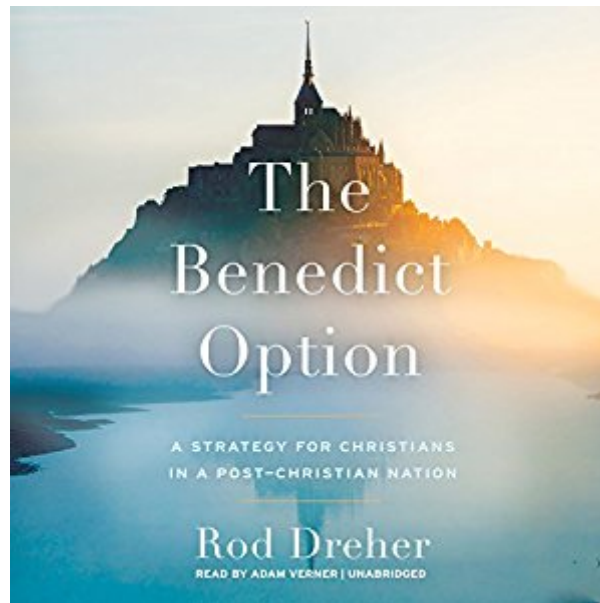


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The Benedict Option: A Strategy For Christians In A Post-Christian Nation



Synopsis

The light of the Christian faith is flickering out all over the West. American churches are beset by a rapidly secularizing culture, the departure of young people, and watered-down pseudo-spirituality. Political solutions have failed, as the self-destruction of the Republican Party indicates, and the future of religious freedom has never been in greater doubt. The center is not holding. The West, cut off from its Christian roots, is falling into a new Dark Age. The good news is that there is a blueprint for a time-tested Christian response to this decline. In *The Benedict Option*, Dreher calls on traditional Christians to learn from the example of St. Benedict of Nursia, a sixth-century monk who turned from the chaos and decadence of the collapsing Roman Empire and found a new way to live out the faith in community. For five difficult centuries, Benedict's monks kept the faith alive through the Dark Ages, and prepared the way for the rebirth of civilization. *The Benedict Option* shows believers how to build the resilience to face the modern world with the confidence and fervor of the early church. Christians face a time of choosing, with the fate of Christianity in Western civilization hanging in the balance. In this powerful challenge to complacency, Dreher shows why churches who fail to take the Benedict Option aren't going to make it.

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"In the world but not of the world" - that's the calling of followers of Jesus (John 17:13-16). But finding the right balance in this equation has always been challenging for the people of God. In first

century Judaism, many Jews opted for isolation from the world, such as the "separated ones" in the sect of the Pharisees, or to a more extreme degree, the ascetic Essene community in Qumran. Others embraced accommodation with the world, like the aristocratic Sadducees or the politically connected Herodians. But Jesus called His followers to chart a different path - insulation from the world and for the world. From the world in the sense that the values of His people would be shaped by God's will and not by the standards of the world. And for the world in the sense that His holy people, firmly rooted and grounded in the faith, would then share the transforming life of Christ with others. In his new book *The Benedict Option*, Rod Dreher argues that western civilization is in a period of stark decline, not unlike the fall of Rome in the days of the ancient monk for whom the book is named. And just as Benedict left the ruins of Rome to create a new community designed to keep the faith alive so that some day civilization could be rebuilt, Dreher argues that Christians need to strategically withdraw from our degraded culture to revitalize faith, family, and community. Some reviewers have charged *The Benedict Option* with hysterical alarmism (and a little subtle racism to boot). Others, like Rachel Held Evans, dismissed the book as an example of the "White Christian Industrial Persecution Complex." After all, as Evans argued, Christians make up 75% of the population. It is hard to imagine how these reviewers could have missed the point more badly. As Dreher points out in the opening chapter of the book, while most Americans identify as "Christians," only a minority believe anything that could be traditionally identified as Christianity. Instead, in actual practice most Americans subscribe to what sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton call "Moral Therapeutic Deism." It is "moral" in the sense that most people think we should be nice to each other. It is "therapeutic" because most people think that God just wants them to be happy. And it is "deism" because most people think God is essentially uninvolved with the world (unless they have a crisis and need divine help to be happy again). Adherents of this new religion don't mind "Christianity" so long as it doesn't interfere with the materialism, consumerism, and radical individualism so endemic to our culture. Only those who have decided to accommodate to our culture would fail to see the hostility of the current age to Lordship of Jesus Christ and those who seek to follow Him. Indeed, almost at the same time Rachel Held Evans pontificated about a "Christian persecution complex," Princeton Theological Seminary retracted an honor it intended to give well-known author Tim Keller precisely because of his traditionalist position ("toxic theology" as one critic put it) on sexual ethics. Big government, big business, and big entertainment have all made it clear that they intend to bring as much pressure to bear as they can on anyone or any institution that dares to defy the social agenda of the LGBTQI movement. Those who chirp away about "alarmism" and a "persecution complex" remind me of Detective Frank Dreben in the old

Police Squad movie telling a crowd, "Please disperse, there's nothing to see here," while a fireworks factory explodes in front of them! But Dreher's concerns about the collapse of our culture extend far beyond sexual ethics. He sees a culture filled with rampant materialism and exploitive consumerism, but so distracted by technology it isn't even aware a problem exists. And such a culture, having lost its memory of the ancient truths about the deeper spiritual realities of the creation and its Creator, is on the verge of overwhelming the faulty levies of the vapid faith held by so many. So his proposal is a "strategic withdrawal" from the world. Critics have distorted this into a full-fledged retreat at best, or escapism at worst. But that is not at all what Dreher has in mind. What he does intend is that those who truly want to follow Jesus must take this commitment seriously, and to take it seriously in all aspects of life: in politics, at church, in the home, in school, at work, and in the bedroom. This requires an intentional decision to think, live, and love differently than the world. So for instance, families should set regular times of prayer and Bible reading. Politics should be about serving the local community. Churches should be about worship, not entertainment. Education should be about learning virtue (and ultimately, knowing God). Work should be a vocation, a stewardship of the talents and blessings of God for His glory. Sex should be celebrated in the context of marriage between a man and woman as a reflection of the intimacy and life-giving nature of God Himself. And technology should be a servant to these purposes, not a master of the world's purposes. When we built our house, we asked for added insulation to keep the house cooler in the summer. We are "in Florida," but we did not want to be "of Florida"! The Benedict Option is a call for Christians to insulate themselves from the fever heat of a dying culture so that we can be ready to serve the culture with faith still intact. "If we are going to be for the world as Christ meant for us to be, we are going to have to spend more time away from the world..." (p. 19). Since Dreher comes from a Catholic/Orthodox background, some of the discussion of monasticism and high church liturgy was foreign to me. But I have been moved by this book to find ways to intentionally order all aspects of my life around the glory of God rather than the present evil age. It has made me think more rigorously about my private time before God, my work ethic in service of God, my relationship with my wife, and my commitment to love others. I strongly encourage you to read it and see how it challenges you to take your faith more seriously, as it has me.

*****This rich book is not what it sounds like--a call for Christians to become more Benedictine or more monastic or more Catholic--it is NOT this...rather, it is a call to Christians of all denominations here in the west to carefully consider ways of being in community as we proceed in a post-Christian world. It is to consider practical ways that the Benedictines have been successful, as well as how

other forms of Christian community have been successful, and then to thoughtfully consider which aspects might help our particular Christian community to thrive. It is written by an Eastern Orthodox Christian (not a Catholic, as some reviewers have reported) but it is a non-denominational book. It will appeal to serious (as in deeply committed) Christians of any denomination whatsoever. It's a provocative book that covers a wealth of different areas for Christians to consider and to be intentional about, including technology, worship, education, and so much more. I have read several books that discuss the future of Christianity--many that have been outstanding--but none as provocative nor as practical as this one. Highest recommendation possible. *****

Dreher has some helpful ideas for preserving healthy Christianity. However, naming his movement the Benedict Option seems strange because the Benedictines intentionally isolated themselves from the world. Dreher proposes subcultures that can actively engage and attract people in the world. His model is the Czech resistance prior to the fall of the Soviet empire which is much different from the Benedictine approach. If he gave the movement another name he might find it more welcomed by evangelicals and other biblically oriented Christians. IN THE INTRODUCTION Dreher presents more than enough evidence that America has chosen against Christianity and that Christian values are in serious decline. On page 3 he states "The culture war that began with the Sexual Revolution in the 1960's has now ended in defeat for Christian conservatives. However, he does not want to focus on the decline but rather on "creative ways to live out the faith," p. 4. Later on page 18 he says "This is not just about our own survival. If we are going to be for the world as Christ meant for us to be, we are going to have to spend more time away from the world, in deep prayer and substantial spiritual training. And: "Today we can see that we've lost on every front and that the swift and relentless currents of secularism have overwhelmed our flimsy barriers," p.8. I wonder if our Christian barriers are always flimsy. Is it realistic to think we can create a Christian society? His ideas here seem like an overstatement and mislead people into thinking that we are in an unusual situation in which we have lost. I don't recall Dreher mentioning any societies in history that were Christian, except possibly the European Middle Ages discussed below. Even in the 1970's Christian musician Barry McGuire sang about "materialistic pleasure slaves looking for another thrill." For most of its history America could not be considered a Christian nation (Deists helped found it). Is it biblical to think that our public interaction will lead to a Christian society, or rather will it lead to a few receiving Jesus and many rejecting him. In other words, I think

the broad and narrow ways hold true in every society. This is normal in history.

IN CHAPTER ONE beginning on page 9 the author rightly criticizes moralistic therapeutic deism, which is the idea that God mostly wants to: make us feel better, help people to be nice to each other, solve our problems, and bring the good people to heaven when they die. Obviously, this is a widespread philosophy in America.

IN CHAPTER TWO Dreher discusses the philosophical roots of our current decline. He mourns the victory of nominalism over realism and recounts how society slowly became more human-centered and less God-centered. He traces this through the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. Dreher quotes statistics about the decline of Christian values among young adults which are sad, although I was a little encouraged by the fact that significant minorities were faithful. Overall, his discussion of the weakness of American Christianity should open the eyes of those who are not aware, but it assumes the questionable ideal of a sustainable Christian society.

On page 12 Dreher summarizes his proposal by saying that we should not continue to fight to influence society rather we should “work on building communities, institutions, and networks of resistance that can outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the occupation,” p. 12. He recounts the story of Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century who developed a set of guidelines for committed Christians that helped establish communities that preserved some order in the chaotic years following the fall of the Roman Empire. Ironically, the lost American Christianity Dreher laments was one heavily influenced by those who had rejected the fundamentalist approach of withdrawing from society to build their own subculture. This group called themselves evangelicals and proceeded to re engage society with fairly good results. Dreher doesn’t address the issue of how it makes sense to adopt the fundamentalist approach again, given the poor results from that earlier fundamentalist withdrawal. Presumably he would criticize the way they withdrew.

IN CHAPTER THREE Dreher tells the story of his visit to a Benedictine monastery along with an explanation of the basics of the Benedictine Rule. He then explains the Benedictine approach to prayer, including the hours and lectio divina. Next is a discussion of Benedictine values including work, asceticism, stability, community, hospitality and order.

IN CHAPTER FOUR he explains how conservative Christians are now not an important bloc in American politics. He also delves into the problems of a Trump administration. On page 83 he says “The real question facing us is not whether to quit politics entirely, but how to exercise political power prudently, especially in an unstable political culture.” He doesn’t fully explain how this fits with his apparently contradictory statement on p. 12 that we should “stop fighting the flood” and build our own “institutions and networks of

resistance, but he does give some suggestions for political engagement. He also discusses the need to champion religious freedom since it will be needed if we are to build our own subcultures. Now he gets to the heart of his proposal: building parallel institutions and subcultures that don't withdraw from society but rather engage it. The model for this is the Czech resistance to communism led by Vaclav Havel in the 1970s and 80s. In this sense Dreher's proposal is not very Benedictine: he is proposing far more engagement with society than Benedict did, and more than the Benedictines practice today. Dreher's proposal of creating a parallel society that can engage the culture and hopefully expand itself is a proposal to be taken very seriously. He is not an escapist looking for a way to isolate Christians from everyone else. He is proposing parallel institutions and networks that could attract anyone in society because they would be providing something good they could not find elsewhere. Actually, evangelical Christianity seems like this already, although not to the extent Dreher would hope. Dreher complains about the weakness of churches but the fact remains that there are thousands of reasonably devout congregations who are engaging society and helping the needy. My own congregation is one of them. Yet Dreher's point that we have much to do in this area is well taken. On page 98 he summarizes how to "do the Benedict Option." "Secede culturally from the mainstream. Turn off the television. Put the smartphones away. Read books. Play games. Make music. Feast with your neighbors. It is not enough to avoid what is bad; you must also embrace what is good." IN CHAPTER 5 he argues that the Benedict Option must be lived in the local church. Godly healthy subcultures need to emerge so that the goodness of God is truly reflected. He agrees with Russell Moore that "by losing its cultural respectability, the church is freer to be radically faithful." He goes on to say that we need to recover our ancient heritage and worship. He spends much time arguing for the need for liturgy. Apparently Dreher is Eastern (Russian) Orthodox, p. 109. This emphasis on liturgy is unfortunate in my view. Liturgical churches have very high rates of nominalism. Moreover, the New Testament emphasizes mutual openness and edification far more than it does liturgy. The Orthodox liturgy he likes is very repetitive and in my view it crowds out biblical fellowship. In my experience long liturgies draw attention away from fellowship. Also, evangelicals already have liturgy in the form of worship music; we already have enough room for content from lyrics and sermons. Dreher quotes James K. A. Smith approvingly but like Smith he is weak on the biblical vision on koinonia. Dreher continues in chapter five by discussing the need for proper asceticism, for real church discipline, apologetics that aims at the heart more than the head, and openness to harsh persecution. IN CHAPTER 6 he

argues for increased levels of community among believers. Homes can be turned into little monasteries (he doesn't propose anything weird). Parents need to be very watchful about who their children befriend. Don't be legalistic with your children. Live physically close to other members of your congregation. Don't idolize your community and don't become isolationist. Don't set your heart on creating the perfect community. IN CHAPTER 7 he argues for the need for classical Christian schools. Students should be pulled out of public schools, learn scripture, learn the classics, learn the history of Western civilization, be wary of weak Christian schools, and be homeschooled if there is no good Christian school nearby. IN CHAPTER 8 he discusses the matter of work and vocation. Christians will be discriminated against in the business world in the future. It is wise to become entrepreneurs now and build Christian employment networks. IN CHAPTER 9 he addresses issues of sex and does not say anything unusual or unbiblical. He also encourages believers to fight pornography. IN CHAPTER 10 Dreher explains the dangers of misusing technology. The internet is especially destructive (agreed) and we would be wise to sometimes fast from the digital world. Also consider restricting smartphone use by children. He concludes the chapter by summing up his book: "If we don't take on everyday practices that keep that sacred order present to ourselves, our families, and our communities, we are going to lose it. And if we lose it, we are at great risk of losing sight of the One to whom everything in that sacred order, like a divine treasure map, points. That has been the main argument of this book," p. 235. IN THE CONCLUSION CHAPTER he emphasizes the need to for Benedict Option communities to focus on love. He also recounts the story of the destruction of the Benedictine community in Norcia, Italy that he visited in chapter three. Earthquakes in Italy in August and October 2016 destroyed the monastery. Yet their community survives today because they had already become true community. Additional comments. The author engages in unfair and unsubstantiated church bashing several times. Also, I believe he sometimes overstates the philosophical roots of problems in our society. Some of the problems are found in most societies throughout history regardless of philosophy. Dreher did not address the issue of the lack of success of monasteries in America in spreading Christian culture. America has hundreds of monasteries, including many Benedictine monasteries, but one could not argue that they have spread in the way that Dreher hopes for the Benedict Option. It is true that Dreher's movement is local church based, but one still wonders why monasticism has not done better here if it has keys to the future of Christianity. Finally, there are other good models for cultural engagement in history. It is curious that Dreher does not present the early Franciscan movement as an option. In the 13th century Francis

and his early followers were unquestionably holy yet engaged urban society in striking and effective ways. This approach seems closer to Dreher's Benedict Option. Another approach that is not so ascetic as Francis's is the Brethren of the Common Life. Fourteenth century founder Gerhard Groote did not require monastic vows but the men (or women) lived in committed communities in cities and focused on spiritual growth as well as the education of children. The Brethren pioneered improvements in education that spread throughout Europe. More recently, the Amish have created their own subculture in America and Dreher's proposal reminds me of the Amish. I did not see any comments on the Amish in his book. Overall, I am thankful that Mr. Dreher is committing himself to finding ways to promote healthy Christian communities that can be a light to the world.

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