

Keep Advancing: Considering *The Benedict Option* from the Global South

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Rod Dreher's book has some things in it that I find interesting and useful.

The emphasis on strong communities that support the lives of believers in meaningful and helpful ways is something on which we could definitely focus. We need to seek God as to how to strengthen our bases and teams. I suspect that the answers will be very layered, constantly changing and diverse across the world's cultures.

What will tie it together for us are our values and the teaching that we have in common. We are to know God and make him known. Perhaps we should spend some major time on going more deeply into what it means to know him and how he has taught us to do that. We all have studied and practiced teachings like meditating on the Scriptures, worship, intercession, spiritual brokenness, hearing God's voice, and so on. We're pointed in the right direction and have great potential to achieve the goal of greater spirituality and closer community by pursuing further the ways that he has already introduced to us as a movement.

I also applaud the emphasis on education. It sometimes seems that in our consideration of how to disciple nations we have tended to focus on the spheres that have the most power, business and government. However, it can be argued that it is more important to focus on the spheres that have the most influence. Family, education, and popular cultural expressions come to mind. Certainly education is foundational to any strategy.

There are also some things in the book that don't seem to me to be a good fit for YWAM.

Dreher puts some emphasis on our ineffectiveness as we grapple with what he calls "liquid modernity." This is certainly worth pondering. However, he proposes that our response to this should be a strategic retreat into communities that isolate themselves from the general culture in order to protect themselves from the tide of evil. Gradually they can then reach out using Christian hospitality as a primary means of outreach.

It is possible that this perspective comes from the author's environment in North America and Western Europe. What is certain is that the Gospel is advancing in most of the world. Out here in the majority south the victories are indisputable and remarkable (Johnson et al, 2016).

When I was studying missions in the late 1960's, for example, Asia was one percent Christian. Almost all of those were nominal Catholics in the Philippines. Now experts believe that China has more than a hundred million believers and it is the country where the number of conversions is highest in the world. Southeast Asia has a vigorous and multiplying Christian movement. India is the second country in the world in the numbers coming to Jesus. Recently I was with a friend who works in the Middle East. She had just finished some meetings with top

Christian demographers. They told her that in the first 1,400 years of Islam there were only two movements of Muslim peoples to Christianity. Since the year 2,000 there have been over one hundred (Garrison, 2014). All over the world the Gospel is energetically advancing. The biggest exceptions to this growth are Western Europe and North America.

This is not the time for YWAM to retreat in any way. Instead of strategic retreat I would suggest we choose dynamic engagement. Recently I took my mother-in-law to Christmas mass at her local parish in Hawaii. The priest gave a clear Gospel message on the centrality of Jesus in salvation. He is from Zambia and is injecting dynamic life into that American parish. In YWAM we are massively international and are uniquely positioned to bring the life of most of the world to the few places where the Church has lost ground.

I also think that it would be ill advised for YWAM to impose a more liturgical approach. While I recognize that some people get life from liturgy I don't think that is true for most of us. I, for example, was raised in a liturgical church but never found Jesus there. Later he made himself known to me in a less formal, more intimate setting. When I practice liturgy now it feels artificial and non-relational. It's like I'm layering protocol between Jesus and myself. It hinders my intimacy with him and is boring. I suspect it would be the same for most of us around the world.

The last thing I would like to address here is Dreher's call for us to follow, at least to some degree, the Rule of Saint Benedict. It seems to me that this option would be both unproductive and spiritually dangerous.

Some decades ago I was in Southern Peru traveling by train with an eighty-year-old Canadian pastor. I had discovered from his roommate that he spent the entire previous night kneeling beside his bed in prayer for the peoples of those mountains. I asked him about that, expressing my desire to be like him. He quickly said, "Oh! Don't copy me!! Run after the grace!!!" He was a very serene man, and I had never seen him so intense. Obviously this was important to him. That advice has been invaluable to me over the years. It left me free and motivated to pursue Jesus without imposing a religious straightjacket on my life.

I believe that we should be very careful not to create any impression that regulations or disciplines are to be seen as virtue or that they will result in spirituality. Paul fought constantly against this idea in his letters. In Colossians 2:16-23 the Holy Spirit strongly warns us against this sort of thing. In Philippians 3:1-9 he also warns us powerfully against a legal, ascetic approach.

While I believe that Dreher understands the strict legal approach to be a means of grace, I have no confidence that this understanding would prevail around the world if YWAM were to adopt something like the Rule of Saint Benedict. I think that we would end up taking away people's freedom to seek his grace and life in relational, intimate and creative ways.

We could very well even give the impression that following Jesus is a matter of ordinances and rules. This is a deadly problem, common in the Body of Christ, and it would be tragic for us to perpetuate it.

Recommended Resources

Garrison, D. (2014). *Wind in the house of Islam: how God is drawing Muslims around the world to faith in Jesus*. Wigtake Resource.

Johnson, T. M., Zurlo, G. A., Hickman, A. W., & Crossing, P. F. (2016). Christianity 2016: Latin America and projecting religions to 2050. *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 40(1), 22-29.

Johnson, T. M., Zurlo, G. A., Hickman, A. W., & Crossing, P. F. (2017). Christianity 2017: Five Hundred Years of Protestant Christianity. *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 41(1), 41-52.