

Out of the Monastery: *The Benedict Option* in the World, not of the World

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The Benedict Option is a radical attempt to define monastic life in a 21st century context. Rod Dreher does not suggest that we all become monks, rather he suggests that we might learn from ancient principles of monastic life and how they might apply to normal people working in the market place, trying to keep their Christian life alive. As Dreher notes, this is about how to 'take Benedictine wisdom out of the monastery and apply it to the challenges of worldly life' today (p. 77).

In facing the stark realities of the fall of Christendom across the Western world and in particular the rise of the liberalist agenda, this book is an interesting challenge to think afresh about what it means to be *in* the world and not *of* the world. Dreher writes from an American perspective and largely for an American audience. Even so, the arguments laid out for Christians thinking about how to preserve biblical truth and practice have application across the Western Body of Christ generally.

Dreher's arguments sometimes border on the apocalyptic, painting a rather dark view of the future that is emerging. Examples he gives are that Christian businesses that stand for Christian standards could be doomed, or the complete loss of Christian thinking at a political level. We are beginning to see examples of a new kind of persecution, that we are not so used to experiencing in the Western world. *The Benedict Option* suggests that Christians will achieve little positive ground in fighting for their rights at a broader political level. Many of the battles Christians feel they are facing are indeed already lost, says Dreher. The great challenge for Christians today, drawing from Benedictine history, is a return to outworking a more organic and grass roots based expression of biblical living. Dreher highlights the influence and potential impact of a *local* church fully alive for Christ. Dreher says that the best way to fight a flood is to 'quit piling up sandbags and to build an ark' instead. He says we should be 'building communities, institutions and networks of resistance that can outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the occupation' (p.12).

Christians cannot afford to be normal anymore, or even to aspire to being accepted as normal. The teachings of Christ are no longer regarded as normal, if in fact they ever have been. True Christians should live counter culturally by our very worldview and how we define humanity and existence. For the Benedictines, local church expression, as we might understand the term, went beyond just weekly worship and prayer meetings. The light and salt of their monastic life impacted everything from local education to local business and looking after the poor. This is far from the general (modern) view of monks removing themselves from society to live in seclusion and isolation. The witness of Christ to the world was radically honed by a proactive expression of *Kingdom of God* living, first to one's neighbour and secondly to the neighbour's neighbour. Whether this is experienced in terms of gratuitous generosity, mercy, free education (the transferal of wisdom and knowledge) or just providing care when needed, historically the church was preserved and continued to slowly grow in this way even throughout the period historians lovingly refer to as the *Dark Ages*! In fact, new neighbours kept joining these radical communities due to this witness of Christ-like living. Whole towns across Europe were formed or grew around Christian

monasteries such as York or Winchester in England. As Dreher (p. 94) observes, this parallel *polis* was not, and is not, about building a gated community solely for Christians but about establishing common institutions and practices that can reverse the isolation and fragmentation of contemporary society.

I did not agree with all of Dreher's apocalyptic premonitions of the future but we are seeing many of his examples today in the UK. The church is slow in perceiving the shock waves of political U-turns toward issues such as sexuality and gender, or knowing how to respond in appropriate ways. This book provides questions to help Christians and church leaders begin to think through what is important and worth protecting. This process takes us beyond survival, to consider what mission shaped (local) practice might look like in our own cultural context. In thinking about new forms of Christian community we must be careful not to reproduce something merely by putting it in newer clothes. As Smith and Robinson (2003, p. 109) remind us, 'There must be a shift from institution to movement, from structures that invite people into a sacred space to an infectious spirituality that invades secular space.'

I like Dreher's analogy of the church becoming a kind of Noah's ark. I do not see this as a picture of escaping certain destruction however. It speaks to me of a transient and flexible community of Jesus followers able to stay afloat during seismic cultural and moral change. You cannot escape from a flood, but you can protect yourself from being overwhelmed by it. Dreher then takes this picture a step further, calling us to consider the prophetic vision of Ezekiel of a restored Jerusalem. In it Ezekiel saw a stream of living water flowing out from the temple of the Lord. The understanding was that this metaphor for abundant life would come from a restored temple, one that brought forth living waters of salvific grace. The church then is both an ark *and* a wellspring of life. Dreher contends, 'You cannot live the Benedict option without seeing both visions simultaneously' (p. 238).

This book is not a call to escapism as some might interpret it to be. It challenges the traditional definition of 'Church on Sunday' or in living a moralistic way of life expressed through privatised religion. The Christian Church of tomorrow will not look like yesterday and not even as it looks today. The cultural epoch rising from the ashes of modernity rides on a post-modern train that lacks rational thought or any consideration as to where it might end up. As we witness yet another beautiful old Wesleyan chapel being renovated into modern apartments we cannot fantasise about returning to a bygone era. Rather we must radically *reimagine* the outworked culture of the Kingdom of God. Everything must change, and that change will come only from brave new groups of people that are willing to try new models and ideas, learning from the past without the need to replicate it exactly.

Vincent Donovan said it well: 'Evangelism [yesterday, as well as tomorrow] is centrifugal. It leaves Jerusalem and is on its way to the ends of the earth and the end of time. To join means this: to join the journey away from the centre – a light for the Gentiles which goes toward the people, seeking them out and taking them by surprise in their darkness' (2001, p. 190).

References

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