

Staying Mission-True: *The Benedict Option* as Strategy for Thriving in Adversity

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How does this book speak to YWAM's development of missional community in this hour of history? Dreher compares the state of society and Christianity today to that of the fall of Rome and the beginning of the so-called Dark Ages. If Christianity is to survive for future generations, he says, we must learn from the strategy of St. Benedict of Nursia in that earlier era, in a sense retreat and regroup to preserve our Christian identity. Thus, as in the earlier case, the church will be able to rise up and give direction to society and culture once again. Dreher states:

Americans cannot stand to contemplate defeat or to accept limits of any kind. But American Christians are going to have to come to terms with the brute fact that we live in a culture, one in which our beliefs make increasingly little sense. We speak a language that the world more and more either cannot hear or finds offensive to its ears.

Could it be that the best way to fight the flood is to . . . stop fighting the flood? That is, to quit piling up sandbags and to build an ark in which to shelter until the water recedes and we can put our feet on dry land again? Rather than wasting energy and resources fighting unwinnable political battles, we should instead work on building communities, institutions, and networks of resistance that can outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the occupation. (p. 12)

Dreher argues that the church in the West is largely in decline and suffers from spiritual anemia: "The changes that have overtaken the West in modern times have revolutionized everything, even the church, which no longer forms souls but caters to selves" (p. 9). Again, "Even more troubling, many of the churches that do stay open will have been hollowed out by a sneaky kind of secularism to the point where the 'Christianity' taught there is devoid of power and life" (p. 10).

Throughout the book, Dreher details the deluge of modernism on today's culture and on the challenges Christians face as we enter into a Post-Christian era. In the midst of this onslaught of darkness, Dreher espouses our only hope to survive the flood is to raise the clarion call for the establishment of modern day Benedict Rule communities and movements. Referring to Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, in which MacIntyre compares our era with that of the fall of Rome, Dreher notes "The world, said MacIntyre, awaits 'another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.' Christians besieged by the raging floodwaters of modernity await someone like Benedict to build arks capable of carrying them and the living faith across the sea of crisis—a Dark Age that could last centuries" (Dreher, p. 18).

My main contention with the author is what I perceive as an overemphasis on retreating and waiting. His approach is in stark contrast to that of the Early Church. In the writings of the

New Testament we see first generation Christians, not only surviving, but thriving and multiplying in a more oppressive, hostile, anti-Christian environment than we experience today. This gives me hope that the battle is not lost, and in the same way as with the early followers of Christ, we can turn the tide and see a wave of revival and advancement of God's Kingdom in our generation.

Although I don't agree with Dreher's premise of retreat, much of what he espouses, put into practice, would indeed help the church regain its identity and mission and make it more effective in advancing God's Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

Throughout the book, Dreher identifies guiding principles and practices of the Benedict Rule and lifestyle that served to preserve Christianity during the Dark Ages and then gives examples and simulations as to what these principles would look like in our generation. These principles applied today would cause the Church to rise out of its spiritual anemia and advance even today in a context often hostile to Christian faith.

Dreher calls the Church neither to succumb to panic nor to remain complacent, but to recognize that the new order is a reality to be lived with. One of the key elements needed, as expressed by Dreher, to regain our identity and destiny as Jesus followers is to recapture the biblical model for family and community. Those who will contribute to this model must "learn how to endure with faith and creativity, to deepen their own prayer lives and adopting practices, focusing on families and communities instead of on partisan politics" (p. 18), and must build the institutions of society, church, and school within which the orthodox Christian faith can survive and prosper through the flood.

When asking how this book speaks to YWAM, the opening question identifies the key factor with the words "missional community." It's the combination of both vibrant Christian community and missional heart that sets YWAM apart from many Christian expressions today.

Community in relationship with Jesus, lived out within the principles of God's word sets YWAM at odds with the norms and values of the world. In an oft-quoted foundational message delivered at a crucial juncture of YWAM's story over a decade ago, founder Loren Cunningham (2012) spoke to three things that must stand together as a tripod to bear the weight of an apostolic movement. "An apostolic movement dries up when there is not integration of these elements: freedom in the Spirit, spiritual eldership, and relationship, all operating under the Word and the will of the Lord." The strength of being centered on Jesus and the Word, living in a relational community, with individual freedom in the Spirit and true spiritual eldership, not only help us to preserve the faith, but give us the apostolic anointing needed to advance God's kingdom into every sphere of society.

When talking about missional communities, we are not just speaking about individuals living in close geographical proximity. A true missional community is a community family that extends beyond the nuclear family and has a unique identity, calling and purpose. Even though we are not perfect, we find these elements in YWAM. They are God's callings to us, his covenantal words to us and the values that he has given us to live and walk out together with him.

The question is then asked how to grow in the missional community of YWAM and how to safeguard our DNA and calling. In *The Benedict Option*, Dreher often talks about the importance of spiritual liturgy to remember and to build a strong Christian culture. “Benedict Option churches will find ways within their own traditions to take on practices, liturgical and otherwise, for the sake of deepening their commitment to Christ by building a thick Christian culture” (p. 121).

In the same way, including the aforementioned tripod principles, the remembering and living out of the covenants and foundational values given to us by God serve as a compass keeping us mission true, creating a strong cultural identity and an affinity from generation to generation. Dreher contends that “If today’s churches are to survive the new Dark Age, they must stop ‘being normal.’ We will need to commit ourselves more deeply to our faith, and we will need to do that in ways that seem odd to contemporary eyes” (p. 102). Living out our YWAM DNA is radical, it is non-conformist, even to many contemporary Christian norms. It does not make us better than others, but it is what enables us to walk out our unique identity as a Christian movement.

In conclusion, as YWAM we need to stay mission true and relevant while at the same time not conforming to the world. We are called to be in this world, but not of this world. This is to say we are sent to this world. It is a proactive posture. With YWAM’s 1100 missional communities in over 180 nations, we are uniquely positioned in the body of Christ to shine in the darkness and advance God’s mission throughout the earth.

References

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