ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE
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The Challenges of "The Benedict Option"

I recently read Rod Dreher's somewhat challenging and provocative book, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. From my vantage point, Dreher's analysis of North American culture and specifically the evangelical church is spot on. He writes: "The most pressing problem Christianity faces is not in politics. It's in parishes. It's with the pastors. Most of all, it's among an increasingly faithless people." The truth is Christianity is declining in the United States. He makes the following observations, supported by statistical data and other pieces of evidence:

- Americans are falling away from the church in unprecedented numbers. America is on the same path of religious decline pioneered by Europe and Canada.

- The faith American Christians profess is, from a moral and theological perspective, shockingly thin. He quotes from and summarizes the argument of Christian sociologist Christian Smith, who characterizes this "faith" as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. The highest goal is to feel good about yourself and be happy. "It's the perfect religion for a self-centered, consumerist culture. But it is not Christianity."

- Since the 1980s, conservative Christians unwittingly participated in their own marginalization by placing too much hope in Republican politics. "But the standard 'religious right' model, based on the idea that the American people are a morally sound majority led by decadent liberal elites, was inaccurate. Conservative Christians helped elect Republican politicians, but that did not stop the slide toward secularism. Too many of us are doubling down on the failed strategies that not only have failed to convert Americans but have also done little to halt the assimilation of Christians to secular norms and beliefs. Mr. Trump is not a solution to this cultural crisis, but rather a symptom of it." The phrase I have used is that evangelicals have embraced a "cultural Christianity" not genuine, biblical Christianity. We are living with the consequences of that choice.

Therefore, Dreher proposes we examine the work and teachings of Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c. 547). Benedict witnessed the chaos, decadence and collapse of the Western Roman Empire. That collapse produced centuries of barbarism under the Germanic tribes which conquered Rome. He founded the Benedictines, who helped rebuild civilization around Christianity. Benedict chose to separate from the decadent culture of his day. Without advocating some of the specific Roman Catholic nuances of Benedict, Dreher argues that today Christians are going

to have to step back to some meaningful degree from the world for the sake of "building up orthodox belief, learning the practices of discipleship and strengthening our communities." American Christians need to "quit looking for a political white knight to save us and open our eyes to the stark reality of Christianity's exile status in our American Babylon."

How should we think through Dreher's proposed solution? He is not calling for a radical separation from culture as in a monastery, but he is clearly calling for a separatistic lifestyle that is protective, somewhat defensive and radically counter-cultural. The Bible decisively warns against "worldliness" and the devastating consequences of following the world and not Christ (see James 4). From the Old Testament, we see that the Children of Israel got into big trouble when they imitated their pagan neighbors and brought their altars and images into the Temple. Yet, somehow Christians are to be "in the world, but not of the world" (John 17: 13-18). Christians have been removed from the world's power at conversion (Galatians 6:14) and, because the cross established a judicial separation between believers and the world, Christians are citizens of a new kingdom (Philippians 3:20). The Bible both discourages absolute physical separation from the people of the world (1 Corinthians 5:9, 10), yet instructs believers to witness to this world (John 17:15), all the while keeping from the influence of the world (James 1:27; 1 Corinthians 7:31; Romans 12:2; 1 John 2:15). How does one resolve this tension? This is a profoundly important question for those who hold to ethical absolutes. In a culture that is increasingly pagan and increasingly relativistic, how one "speaks" Christianity to the culture is critical. Should Christians separate from the culture and live in isolation? Should Christians seek to accommodate completely to the culture and seek to influence its institutions and values from the inside? Or should Christians seek to transform the culture by seeking to control its institutions and claim each for Christ? Historical examples for each are readily available from church history and are present today in our world.

Radical separatism (e.g., the church before Constantine in AD 313, monastic communities, Anabaptist groups such as the Amish, the Hutterites) argues that Christians must withdraw from any involvement in the world. There is an antithesis between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world and the choice is clear—withdraw. Clear biblical examples of this choice are Noah (whom God called out of the culture before He destroyed it), Abram (called to separate from pagan Mesopotamia) and Moses (called to separate from idolatrous Egypt). The New Testament buttresses this conviction with verses like Matthew 6:24 ("You cannot serve two masters . . . .), 1 Peter 2:11 and 1 John 2:15. For this model, the church of Jesus Christ is a counterculture which lives by kingdom principles. It is to have nothing to do with this world.

How should we think about the Separational model? In a culture that is increasingly pagan and antagonistic to Christianity, there is much that is appealing. This model stresses the "other-worldly" character of a genuinely biblical Christianity. It further calls people to recognize that "this world is not my home," as we often sing. After all, Jesus radically rejected the status quo of His culture and died because of it. Yet, this model has serious dangers that necessitates rejection of its as a viable option.

There are three dangers to this model. First, separatism can quickly lead to asceticism, a

lifestyle of self-denial that ends up denying the goodness of God's creation. From God's declaration in Genesis 1 that all of His creation is "good," to Paul's powerful affirmation that everything is created by God and nothing is to be rejected (1 Timothy 4:4), the Bible condemns all tendencies toward an asceticism that denies creation's innate goodness. Second, this model easily produces a dangerous sacred/secular dichotomy. For the believer, the Bible clearly rejects the compartmentalization of life into things that are sacred and those that are secular. For the Christian, everything is sacred. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that the believer is to "do all to the glory of God." Finally, this model can lead to a complete withdrawal from the culture, something clearly condemned in the Bible. In 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 Paul chastises the Corinthians for misunderstanding his admonition about disciplining the wayward brother. He says that they processed incorrectly his teaching about not "associating" with sinners. The only way to do that was to die, and that is not what he wanted them to do.

Robert Webber, in his book, *Saints and Sinners*, proposes a lifestyle that is modeled after Jesus, for He separated from the evils of His culture, identified with its institutions and people, yet sought to transform it from the inside out. By adding to His deity humanity, Jesus identified with the world, its social order, its people and its customs. Similarly, the church is to do the same. At bottom, this is the heart of Christ's admonition that we are "to be in the world but not of the world" (John 17:13-18). Yet, Christ separated Himself from the evil distortions of the created order. For example, He had nothing to do with the distorted use of wealth, social position or political power. Finally, through His death, burial and resurrection, He broke the power of sin and Satan and guarantees the world's transformation when He returns in glory and power. Similarly, the church is to move culture's institutions toward genuine, biblical righteousness, all the while anticipating His final transforming work when He returns.

How does the believer live out Webber's "incarnational model"? First, the Christian always lives with tension, the tension between that which is transformable and that from which he or she must separate. For example, there are many good structures in the culture—art, economics, sports, and vocations—yet there are always the evil distortions of those good structures—e.g., pornography, greed, workaholism, idolatry. The Christian should identify with the good structures and seek their transformation but always separate from those evil distortions. Second, there is no simple formula for living with or resolving this tension. Looking for *the* biblical answer to each practical question is rarely possible. Applying the principles of Scripture to each person's situation may well produce considerably different judgments. The believer's responsibility is to know God's Word, to know the mind of Christ, and then choose a course of action in the nonmoral areas of life that most faithfully represents God's revealed will.

What are some examples of this tension? In seeking to identify with the cultural structures, while separating from their evil distortions, should a Christian own a TV, a computer, an i-Phone, etc.? Listen to non-Christian music? Obviously, believers will answer these questions differently but how each is answered represents the variety of expressions within the Christian church. How Christians personally resolve this tension should produce a healthy biblical tolerance, and a thankfulness for the multiplicity of expressions of Christianity. It is not easy to

resolve the tension between identifying with the culture's institutions and structures and seeking to separate from the distortions of each. Some Christians will choose not to own a TV or have an i-Phone, nor listen to secular music or play video games. Agreeing to disagree on such matters guards against unhealthy legalism and promotes a healthy dialogue about living within a non-Christian culture.

To be "in the world but not of the world" (as Jesus Christ lived His life on earth) is to live a life filled with tension. It is not easy! But the Scriptures seem to lay out a general pattern: Identify with the culture into which Christ places you but separate from its evil, all the while seeking to be an agent of God's transforming grace. This is the life Jesus modeled and the life we should strive to live to His glory (1 Corinthians 10:31).

See Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation;* Dreher's essay in the *New York Times* (3 August 2017); and James P. Eckman, *Christian Ethics*, pp. 19-24).