

“The Future of Christianity in the West” – 1

Introduction

This is the first of nine articles in a series entitled “The Future of Christianity in the West.”

Rod Dreher argues in his book *The Benedict Option* (2017), that the traditional western, Christian civilization of the past 1500 years is collapsing. The evolving secular society that is replacing it increasingly is opposed to Christianity. Christians today are living and working in an environment that is hostile to faithful Christian discipleship. Christian moral teaching is seen as hate speech and given the same social status as racism. Those who fail to accept the LGBTQ agenda are viewed as hopelessly bigoted and dangerous. The U. S. Supreme Court’s 2015 *Obergefell* decision declaring a constitutional right to same sex “marriage” is seen by Dreher as the “Waterloo” of religious conservatism.¹ Meanwhile the church is increasingly compromised and impotent. Opinion polls document the collapsing of historic moral and doctrinal norms of professing Christians.

“Nothing changes a man’s outlook on life like having to think about the kind of world his children will inherit,” Dreher maintains, as he seeks to sharpen our outlook.² Secular culture is invasive, corrupt, and pervasive.

[W]e in the modern West are living under barbarism, though we do not recognize it. Our scientists, our judges, our princes, our scholars, and our scribes – they are at work demolishing the faith, the family, gender, even what it means to be human. Our barbarians have exchanged the animal pelts and spears of the past for designer suits and smartphones.”³

Business-as-usual Christianity will not survive. He insists that we have “to choose to make a decisive leap into a truly countercultural way of living Christianity, or (we) will doom our children and our children’s children to assimilation.”⁴ Absent a re-energizing of orthodox Christianity in the West, the church, he fears, will disappear.

The alternative? “The best way to fight the flood,” he argues, 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.” He urges that we “quit wasting energy and resources fighting unwinnable political battles,” and instead, “work on building communities, institutions, and networks of resistance that can outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the occupation.”⁵

This, then, is the Benedict option. The early Christian monk Benedict (480-546) anticipated the collapse of the institutions of classical civilization and its accompanying decay of morals into a dark age. Though born into the world of privileged Roman nobility, at the age of 20 he chose to pursue the life of a monk. After years as a hermit monk, he prepared for the approaching chaos

¹ Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Penguin Random House, LLC, 2017), 1.

² Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid., 17.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

by establishing a monastic community in which the civility, learning and piety of the classical and Christian past could be preserved. Dreher argues that a new Benedict and a new movement of orthodox Christians is needed if Christianity is to survive in the West.

If believers don't come out of Babylon and be separate, sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally, their faith will not survive for another generation or two in this culture of death.⁶

Serious Christians will need to deepen their faith, focus on their families, communities, churches, schools, and other faith-affirming and faith-shaped institutions if orthodox Christianity is to survive and thrive in the secular future.

The issues

What are the philosophical/theological issues that place us in such intense conflict with the direction of our culture? We may outline the following:⁷

- * *human nature* – we believe that humanity is fallen, that human nature is corrupt, that people are not basically good but the opposite. Evil comes from within human nature, not from external sources. Progressives believe people are basically good and that evil comes from unjust external social structures such as capitalism, patriarchy, poverty, inequality, lack of education, and so on.
- * *human will* – we believe that people are responsible for their actions. What we do we do because we choose to do it. Consequently, we are culpable for our decisions. Secular progressives believe that either nature or nurture determines our choices. Our decisions are driven either by our genes (nature) or our environment (nurture, such as poverty, absentee fathers, domineering mothers, racism, sexism, patriarchy, capitalism, etc.). Progressives are deterministic and fatalistic.
- * *morality* – we believe that right and wrong are determined by a transcendent moral code. Right and wrong are objectively and universally right or wrong. They believe that morality is culturally conditioned and relative, the moral code a tool by which the privileged oppress the powerless.
- * *gender roles* – we believe that God brought order out of chaos by separating and distinguishing things that differ (e.g. light and darkness, sea and dry land). This includes distinguishing males from females. Men are not women and women are not men. Progressives believe that men and women are interchangeable, that all distinctions are external, superficial, and culturally conditioned.
- * *marriage* – we believe that marriage is of divine institution, is the lifelong union of one man and one woman, which union is procreative in design and intent. They believe that “marriage” is the sexual union of *any* two persons: same sex or different sex, without regard to procreation or children, lasting only as long as such union is mutually satisfying.
- * *family* – we believe that the family, composed of a mother, father, and children, is the basic unit of society. This is the biblical ideal and it is best suited to human flourishing. They believe that family can be redefined to suit the preferences of those who wish to compose it. Any social unit can be declared to be a family.

⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷ I have interacted with Dennis Prager, “Why the Left Mocks the Bible,” in identifying these categories (*National Review*, May 7, 2019).

**God* – we believe that wisdom begins with acknowledging the existence and authority of God. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Progressives view is that God, if He exists at all, is irrelevant to wisdom and the issues that we face today.

Because of these seven points of departure, orthodox Christians find themselves in tension with, even active combat with the dominant culture in the West. This battle for survival, for the soul of the church promises only to intensify in the years ahead.

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