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iAt Book Club: The Benedict Option

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iAt Book Club: The Benedict Option

Abstract

This submission marks iAt's first book club series featuring the book, "The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation," by Rod Dreher. Various voices have contributed to the series as they interacted with one another and responded to the book. Series contributors are Donald Roth, Scott Culpepper, Gustavo Maya, Erin Olson, and Robert Lancaster.

Access publisher's site and additional readers' comments: <http://inallthings.org/tag/book-club/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

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iAt Book Club: The Benedict Option (part 1)

Donald Roth

Title: The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation

Author: Rod Dreher

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When figuring out who would kick off the inaugural book discussion roundtable at iAt, we decided that someone needed to be tasked with framing the book itself so that folks at home could follow along. By group consensus, it was decided that I should be the one thrown under the bus, so what follows is my attempt to let you cheat by reading over my shoulder as I boil a 250-page book down into a couple of paragraphs. I will follow the summarizing with a few impressions about the book and some of the early responses it's getting. We hope to make this a bit more of an informal (but substantive) conversation, so we warmly welcome your comments throughout this series.

TL; DR: The Book in a Nutshell

*"The Benedict Option ... [i]t's just the church being what the church is supposed to be, but if you give it a name, that makes people care."*¹

Rod Dreher's book *The Benedict Option* aims both to diagnose the illness of the era and to prescribe a solution to that problem. As Dreher sees it, American Christianity has spent the better part of the last century waging a culture war by focusing on the acquisition and maintenance of political power, rather than building deep-rooted local communities that could impact broader society as an influential subculture. Dreher says that we stand at a crisis point in the modern West due to the rise of moral relativism, man-centered faith, and the enshrinement of personal autonomy as the best measure of what makes us who we are. In this crisis, the culture war is lost, and Christians need to look for a new strategy.

To find this new strategy, Dreher draws on analogies and examples from a number of faith traditions. He looks to Orthodox Jewish communities that have weathered incredible hardship; he looks to Mormon communities and their remarkable cultural resilience; but, primarily, he looks to the model of monastic communities and their efforts in the West to weather the cultural upheaval of the fall of Rome. In fact, the name of *The Benedict Option* is Dreher's application of the Rule of St. Benedict, a practical manual drawn up to order those monastic communities.

Dreher's solution channels some of the themes of the Rule into a modern community. The major themes that Dreher identifies are:

1. Order – ordering our whole lives toward God's service,
2. Prayer – immersing ourselves in God's presence through prayer and Scripture-reading,
3. Work – treating our work as a calling before God,
4. Asceticism – learning to deny ourselves,
5. Stability & Community – being deeply rooted in communities of faith,
6. Hospitality – maintaining an open and benevolent attitude toward the broader culture,
7. Balance – maintaining all of the above in a spirit of moderation and grace.

Dreher emphasizes the importance of church, home, and school in a way that resonates deeply with what I was raised to value in the Kuyperian tradition, and there are many other aspects of Dreher's analysis which may sound familiar. His discussion of anthropology draws on Charles Taylor; his diagnosis of a problem in the church is rooted in the research of Christian Smith and others, and he explicitly promotes James K.A. Smith's emphasis on the importance of both practicing intentional liturgy in the church and recognizing cultural liturgies in our daily lives.

With all that is familiar here, one might expect a relatively warm reception around the broader Christian community (Dreher certainly seems to have thought so), but the book has proven surprisingly controversial. Consider, for example, the strongly-worded rejection of Dreher's thought by James K.A. Smith in the *Washington Post*. I'm sure the rest of the book group will want to talk about some reasons for this response, along with their own reactions, but I will to use my remaining space to venture only one possible "why."

Metaphorical Differences: Why Our Views of Kingdom and Discipleship Matter

Here, I am willfully overlooking questions I could raise about Dreher's historical analysis, focus on mainstream (white) evangelicalism, or insistence on a classical educational model. Instead, the thing that I found most curious coming away from the book was how uncontroversial most of its recommendations are. Particularly in the narrow focus on church polity, Smith and Dreher recommend something very similar; so, even if their diagnoses differ, why all the heat and fury when they prescribe much the same treatment?

Aspects of this controversy remind me of theological disputes over the way Christians relate to the Kingdom of God: the "what" and "why" might be diametrically opposed, but the "how" in the way we should interact with the world can be shockingly similar. When studying that controversy, I began to develop a theory to explain the division, and, like a kid trotting out his favorite toy, I'm going to try to explain this dispute in terms of my theory about what I call operative metaphors.²

When it comes to living out our Christian lives, the way that we see our roles as disciples and how we conceive of the kingdom of God are of vital importance. There are many principles and rules that we can draw from Scripture in describing these two things, but really feeling them, really living them, is rooted in our imagination. Without indulging myself too much further, my

theory is that there are a limited number of Biblical images on which we draw while imagining our role in the kingdom, and, while all of these roles have a Biblical basis, we will find ourselves resonating more with some over others based on how we resolve a number of tricky practical and theological questions.

There is no question that a number of mysteries and tensions lie at the heart of the Christian faith. How do we emphasize both belief and action (faith v. works)? How is the Kingdom “already” and “not yet”? How should we live “in the world, but not of it”? How do I discern between a communal and an individual calling in Scripture? Should the church focus its efforts inward or outward?

I recognize that I’ve framed most of these questions as a binary, and, while a binary is rarely reflective of truth, it is often reflective of our tendency to think about truth. If there is some inherent tension in our beliefs, psychologists tell us that we *will* try to resolve that cognitive dissonance; a key method of doing so is to lean, be it ever so subtly, one way or another. I think this leaning is human nature, as a result creating a sort of gravitational pull on our imagination such that we naturally sense something “off” when we sense that Christians lean different ways on these key issues.

If you’ve hung with me through that tangent, the crux of it, I think, is this: for all of their agreement on certain practical applications, Smith and Dreher are drawn to different imaginative visions of what role the church and believer play with respect to the kingdom. Reading Dreher, there’s an obvious affinity for viewing Christians here as exiles in a foreign land, while Smith, I suspect, would be more prone to talk of Christians as ambassadors or kingdom builders.

If I’m right, naming these tendencies may be helpful in engaging with this issue. Exile and ambassador/builder just *feel* different, don’t they? If you pick the one that you feel you agree with less, think through why that is. If you’re suspicious of exile, is it because that sounds like detachment from the world coupled with a persecution complex? Yet, those who resonate with this metaphor will point out that the Jewish exiles, which this metaphor draws richly on, were called to “seek the welfare of the city” (Jer. 29:7) to which they were taken.

In my experience, many (not all) Christians who resonate with being exiles will moderate their imaginations with reminders like the verse from Jeremiah, but they’ll still talk like exiles. Practically, this means that two people—such as Smith and Dreher—may sound quite similar, but the overall tone between the two is dissonant because their outlooks *feel* different. If naming our biases can help with clear thinking in other areas, perhaps naming our tendencies of imagination could be a useful addition to this sort of dialogue.

What do you think? Does this concept help in explaining some of the disconnect between these two men? What other reactions or responses do you have to *The Benedict Option*?

Footnotes

1. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option* (Penguin, 2017) at 142.
 2. Forgive me, but here—if you're interested—are [some shameless plugs](#) to pieces I've written on this topic.
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iAt Book Club: The Benedict Option (part 2)

Scott Culpepper

Donald, you have done a great job framing the major arguments of Dreher's *The Benedict Option* and analyzing the structure of the text. I think you correctly note and quote that, in many instances, Dreher's recommendations for action amount to "giving a name to" the idea that the church be the church. The major takeaways seem to be that Christian families should operate like Christian families, Christians should pursue an intentional strategy for shaping education and spiritual formation for the young, and local Christian communities should seek to implement Christian ideals within their immediate spheres of influence. They must do these things while extending the hand of what Dreher calls "hospitality" to the larger culture as a whole. This dynamic may well be part of the problem Dreher is having with his critics. There has been a lot of hype surrounding the notion of the "Benedict Option" and the publication of the book, much of it pushed by Dreher himself. It has been amusing to me how often Dreher has defended his views by accusing his critics of either not reading his book or misunderstanding his argument. If Dreher is correct that his critics are reading more into his argument than he intended, it may well be because he promises much and delivers little that is original. People are investing his work with novel interpretations because one would expect novel proposals after his rather dismal and apocalyptic diagnosis of Christian prospects in American culture. Thus, this lack of originality, weak engagement with historical context or nuance in historical interpretation, and a naiveté regarding how quickly and easily separated Christian enclaves can degenerate into insular authoritarian communities are my primary critiques of the book.

Since I am the resident historian in this discussion, I will act true to form and focus on a couple of the historical and political issues raised by Dreher. An extensive treatment would take much more space than I have here, but there are at least a couple problems that I can highlight. First, Dreher does deserve credit for recognizing that fighting the "culture wars" has been both futile and probably counterproductive. One could make the argument that evangelicals and Catholics in America have strengthened the hand of the very forces they have opposed through the politicized methods they have used to fight these cultural conflicts over the last forty years. I also think he is correct in arguing that the Trump presidency is a coda rather than a turning point in our cultural conversation. Christians have not escaped having to face the realities of living in a pluralistic society. Trump's election has only delayed that conversation. And the

coming strong reaction against his presidency and all who supported it is likely to put orthodox Christians in an even more difficult position in regard to mainstream culture. His attempt to propose a third or even fourth way beyond the polarized and limited options presented for Christian consideration by both the “religious” right and the “secular” left is laudable. The problems are in the details, and some of those problems are in the historical details. To paraphrase the great Enlightenment wit Voltaire, the Benedict Option does not seem to be very Benedictine and it is really not clear what the option is.

For example, is Dreher actually advocating some kind of cloistered existence for Christians? Sometimes it seems maybe yes, such as when he visits the modern version of Monte Cassino in Italy, but, at other places, he insists that he is not suggesting that we all become monks. In fact, what he is suggesting sounds to me more like the notion of an Anabaptist Hutterite *Bruderhof* than a Benedictine cloister. The only thing missing is an incorporation of the Hutterite community of goods or custom of sharing all things in common, a proposal that is definitely not going to come from the pen of a champion of free enterprise like Dreher. If Dreher wants to highlight the positive potential of Christian communities existing alongside mainstream culture, he ignores a multitude of examples from earlier American history. Again, nothing he proposes is new. What he suggests resonates so powerfully with Donald’s memories of growing up in Christian Reformed communities because Dutch immigrants were living the kind of life Dreher recommends as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Attempts to create communal utopias have been prolific in American history, from early Shaker enclaves to Brook Farm to more recent communal experiments among the “Jesus People” of the early seventies. What is different now is that people who were once in the cultural majority are learning how to deal with the same outsider status that minority religious groups have faced throughout the length and breadth of American history.

Dreher’s choice of the Rule of St. Benedict as the tool to frame his essay on Christian community seems to me a major reason for interpretive misunderstandings of how radically separated he intends this community to be. What he is actually proposing is no different from the basic strategies Christians have employed to create and influence local communities for centuries. Dreher would readily admit that even Benedictine communities were not as separated from the larger cultures of medieval Europe than popular Protestant stereotypes would allow, but he does not make this reality clear enough in his book. He also neglects to mention the contribution of Irish and Scottish monks whose traditions grew separately from Benedictine monasticism and greatly enriched medieval monasticism when their traditions eventually merged with English Benedictine monasticism. When Charlemagne established Benedict’s Rule in monastic schools across Europe, it was a combination of political and ecclesiastical influences. And while Benedictine contributions certainly helped salvage much of western culture during the early medieval period, the story is more complicated and nuanced than simply stating that the Benedictines single-handedly saved western culture. And Benedictine communities had their problems as well. The notion that medieval Benedictine monasteries represent some apex in the pursuit of Christian community rests on sandy foundations, in light of the fact that monastic leaders were clamoring for reform of those communities in the ninth and tenth centuries (only a hundred years after the emperor

Charlemagne had supported their establishment throughout his realm). And with that, I will yield the floor, because I have already gone longer than I planned.

iAt Book Club: The Benedict Option (part 3)

Gustavo Maya

Thanks, Donald and Scott, for kicking off our discussion. You both raise some important points. I, too, have been surprised by the reception of *The Benedict Option*. Very few recently-published books have had so much attention lavished on them. It's been the subject of discussion in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Commonweal*, *First Things*, *The Christian Century*, and many other venues—including *In All Things*. It's an impressive list.

Of course, not all reviews have been positive. Many have been quite critical. Yet, Rod Dreher seems to have struck a nerve. And now comes word that *The Benedict Option* is number seven on the New York Times bestseller list. Dreher isn't exactly marginalized! That people sit up and take notice says a lot about the kind of influence Dreher has. Of course, he'll complain that liberals are criticizing him, and he's right. But that doesn't negate how influential he's become in certain segments of the population.

I want to say something about James K. A. Smith's review in *The Washington Post*. Particularly, how Smith got a lot of flak for noting the racial element of Dreher's position. Here's the offending passage:

"But the new alarmism is something different. It is tinged with a bitterness and resentment and sense of loss that carries a whiff of privilege threatened rather than witness compromised. When Dreher, for example, laments the "loss of a world," several people notice that world tends to be white. And what seems to be lost is a certain default power and privilege. When Dreher imagines "vibrant Christianity," it is on the other side of the globe. He doesn't see the explosion of African churches in the heart of New York City or the remarkable growth of Latino Protestantism. The fear seems suspiciously tied to white erosion."

And here's Dreher's response from his blog:

"That's asinine progressive trolling, and as someone who requested and received a review copy of *The Benedict Option*, Smith surely knows it — especially because the book specifically warns that the Trump phenomenon is no solution to the problem we face, but a symptom of it. The book takes a view from 30,000 feet of American Christianity. I cite the research of Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith, who documents the stark decline of American Christian belief, compared to historical doctrinal norms. I cite the more recent findings, by Pew, by Jean Twenge, and by others, showing the unprecedented falloff of religious identification and

practice among Millennials. And I cite the recent study by two eminent sociologists of religion who found that the United States is now on the same secularizing track as Europe...”

There’s clearly a disconnect between these two. Smith refers to the loss of power and privilege of white Christianity. Dreher responds with the overall number for the decline of Christianity in America. Those are two distinct points, and they can both be right. Christianity, as a whole, can be in decline even as certain segments of it continue to flourish. But Dreher doesn’t acknowledge that the decline of Christian political and cultural *power* that he laments is mostly that of *whites*. Some accused Smith of calling Dreher a racist just for noting the point. But that’s not right with regard to Smith or to Dreher. Dreher isn’t a racist, and Smith wasn’t calling him one.

Smith’s point, it seems to me, is that Dreher is shaped by race, by his whiteness, in ways that prevent him from seeing how race influences his perspective: the loss of power of *white* Christians is seen as the loss of Christianity *tout court* and that loss is to be lamented. In other words, white Christianity is conflated with Christianity. This doesn’t necessarily mean that Dreher is a racist. He’s just blind or oblivious to how race tends to operate in the U.S.

There are intentional forms of *racism*, but *race* also works as a social force that structures our perceptions, values, practices, institutions, etc. We need to distinguish between the intentional and structural varieties. The problem is that in our so-called colorblind era, any mention of race is reduced to the intentional variety, which then leaves us unable to address to the structural variety, and that’s a problem.

Some people are skeptical about social structures and their explanatory power. Some kinds of social-structural explanations are troublesome and have rightly been criticized for leaving out individual agency and moral responsibility. But this doesn’t mean that all such explanations are bad or wrong. We need better explanations. That’s what the social scientists that Dreher cites are trying to provide with regard to American Christianity. Scholars try to do the same thing for race.

When Smith noted that the lost world lamented by Dreher is white, I think he was invoking a social-structural account of race, particularly whiteness, as a means of explaining the problem with Dreher’s perspective and the problem with what Dreher identifies as a problem. But because race is usually reduced to intentional *racism*, Smith’s critics took him to be accusing Dreher of racism. That’s unfortunate and avoidable. In many instances, race structures our social world even in the absence of intentional racial discrimination. Colorblindness blinds us from seeing this truth.

iAt Book Club: The Benedict Option: Optional? and For Whom? (part 4)

Erin Olson

I was first introduced to Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option* in April 2015 at the Q Ideas Conference in Boston, MA. At that time, Dreher had simply coined the phrase and seemed to be in the beginning stages of formulating his arguments for the "option" and subsequent plans. Now, two years later, I've just finished reading the book *The Benedict Option* and I'm as intrigued by Dreher's ideas as I was two years ago. I'm intrigued, but don't sign me up quite yet. While I have many questions and concerns about his ideas, my main ones are these—is this truly an option for all people, and could there be other options we should consider first?

First, is this an option for everyone? Dreher calls his idea "*the Benedict Option*", but is it really an option for all people? Or is this available only for those with privilege? As the social scientist of the book group, I feel it's my duty to think about how Dreher's "option" might affect people on the fringes of society—the marginalized.

For example, the second half of the book is dedicated to laying out some of the specific implications of the "option". This includes a new view of Christian's involvement in families, politics, education, work, and church. I won't go into the specifics of these plans now, but my overall reaction was to think about how this might affect or exclude those of low socioeconomic status. Dreher talks of the creation of "Christian village", which at its root is the family, but he also talks about church as the foundation of this community; a major flaw in Dreher's plan seems to be accessibility to this community for the poor and lower class. This seems to be an option only available to those with money and power. Already today, significant divides exist between the rich and the poor, and gentrification has pushed people of poverty out of many urban areas. We tend to cluster not only by race, but also according to our placement on the social and class hierarchy. By following Dreher's ideas, might we not end up driving a larger wedge between the classes? If the middle to upper class Christians all go into "community" with one another, where does that leave our brothers and sisters who cannot afford this "option"? Are we truly ready to share our resources with the poor so that they can join these Christian enclaves? As Scott said in his piece, Dreher, a supporter of free enterprise, is unlikely to support this challenging and yet seemingly necessary aspect of his suggested communities.

Second, is it truly optional? Dreher seems to say we *must* do this or else, and yet he doesn't really state the overall goals of this option—what exactly are we hoping to accomplish? Can we ever plan to emerge from this cloistered existence? Dreher says that the "forces of dissolution from popular culture are too great for individuals or families to resist on their own" (p. 50) and therefore we must "embed ourselves in stable communities of faith". While other authors have had commentary about the state of our current culture wars, they have given alternatives that seem more about engaging with the broader society than about removing ourselves from it. Dreher, on the other hand, finds the solution not to be engaging with culture, but instead, to "build a Christian way of life that stands as an island of sanctity and stability amid the high tide

of liquid modernity” (p. 54). This way of life is characterized by an eight-part rule that includes order, prayer, work, asceticism, stability, community, hospitality, and balance. I won’t take the time in this piece to flesh these out, but each, while an important component of Dreher’s option, yet doesn’t seem to be anything new or novel.

At one point, he says, “We’re a minority now, so let’s be a creative one, offering warm, living, light-filled alternatives to a world growing cold, dead, and dark. We will increasingly be without influence, but let’s be guided by monastic wisdom and welcome this humbly as an opportunity sent by God for our purification and sanctification” (p. 99). He predicts we will continue to lose our political influence as Christians, but he suggests that people might look to us as an alternative. What if they don’t? Are we prepared to stand on the sidelines and watch the inevitable decline of our world and society as Dreher predicts will happen?

Overall, while Dreher’s diagnosis and prognosis both hint of a “the sky is falling” mentality, there seems to be some accuracy to these statements. He does, however, fail to recognize that this may not be true for the Christian faith overall. As my colleague Gustavo pointed out in his last piece and as Jamie Smith has said in his critique of the book, Dreher seems to be talking primarily about white Christianity in the U.S. His diagnosis does not seem to apply to churches of color where the Christian faith seems to be thriving rather than being “bracketed away” from other parts of believers’ lives (p. 75).

Perhaps Dreher’s Benedictine solution is not the only option. Maybe those of us concerned about the future of white Christianity in America would be better off visiting our brothers and sisters of color in their churches. Maybe we should study and then model what’s keeping the church in the global south thriving and growing. Maybe the answer isn’t drawing further into ourselves and doing more navel gazing, but instead seeing what we can learn from our friends and neighbors who are *not* staring up at the sky, waiting for the next piece to drop.

iAt Book Club: The Benedict Option (part 5)

Donald Roth

The only tough part of a virtual roundtable like this book club series is figuring out how to either respond to all of the good points made or to pick from among them in a way that doesn’t neglect something valuable. I’m going to have to be selective, and I hope to perhaps pick up on a couple of other strands at a later point. For now, I want to address some of the discussion of the role of race and privilege in Dreher’s analysis.

As a white male, it’s a little risky for me to raise any questions about this sort of issue. I’ll say from the outset that I’m not rejecting the significant role that race plays, so much as the purpose it serves for Dreher’s argument, especially as a criticism that presumably disqualifies

some aspect of his recommendation. To do this, I want to look at Dreher's diagnosis and his prescription in turn.

Is Dreher diagnosing purely white decline?

I think one of the major sources of confusion around Dreher's diagnosis is a lack of precision regarding what exactly the problem is. More precisely, it's the notion that there's *a problem*, in the singular sense. Dreher is lamenting a decline of Christianity, but he cites sources as diverse as Christian Smith and the Supreme Court in *Windsor* to make his point. In doing so, Dreher is really pointing to a variety of causes, and not all of them include a racial component. I think the conflation of these causes helps to explain some of the disconnect apparent between Dreher and his critics, and this is a conflation of which both sides are guilty. As I see it, the three principal strands of Dreher's diagnosis of decline are the growth of false gospels, the decline of Christian commitment to certain moral propositions, and the waning of Christian cultural dominance. The causes interact with one another, but we need to look at them separately, and I think only the third one is sufficiently correlated with race to be called a "white" issue.

Taking this in reverse order, the decline of Christian cultural dominance could be fairly considered a concern primarily for white Christians. I've heard some culture war language from communities of color, but it's nowhere near as common as in white churches. In fact, it might be fair to consider the whole "God and Country" theological distortion to be almost entirely a white phenomenon. For groups which have often felt boot of the social order on their necks, it makes sense that the concept of confusing patriotism with religious fervor would be much less attractive. Of course, religious cultural dominance over the last few hundred years has had benefits and dangers for all Christian communities, and there's something lost and gained by them all in its decline, but I would concede that the benefits have been more broadly enjoyed by white Christians.

Another cause for the decline that Dreher identifies is a waning commitment to Christian sexual ethics. While this is certainly true of the broader culture, the concern does not end there, so this is not just a lament of a decline of Christian cultural dominance. Instead, the concern here is an adoption of the sexual ethic of the broader society. This is a temptation exacerbated by waning cultural influence, sure, but the concern is logically distinct from the earlier complaint. This isn't to say that Christians are suddenly magically struggling with sexual immorality for the first time, but it's a lament that Christians are increasingly rejecting such notions as the immorality of extramarital sex, which is not a concern isolated to white communities.

Finally, Dreher states that he's concerned with a waning Christianity due to the growth of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). I would argue that this concern should include other false gospels, especially the prosperity gospel, which is a special permutation of the moralism that MTD espouses. I will confess limited experience in African American churches, but the popularity of preachers like T.D. Jakes suggests that the threat of the prosperity gospel is not limited to white Christianity, and the testimony of several friends working in Latin America makes me more confident of that assertion regarding Latino communities. Yes, there are

thriving minority communities and diverse urban churches where Christianity is flourishing, but I think it would be painting with a broad and inaccurate brush to suggest that white churches are failing while churches of color are thriving.

One last note on this part: while I'm defending Dreher to a degree here, he's just as guilty of imprecision as his detractors. I think we would do much better to have a discussion of decline that separates out the causal threads, defines what we mean by decline, and then addresses how those threads interact (as well as how it's not all negative). Perhaps that's too much to demand of a book aimed at a popular audience, but I'd still prefer it.

Is this only an option for the privileged?

I can be more brief on this topic than the last, but in line with my understanding that Dreher is largely arguing that the church should be the church, I can't believe that this would be an option solely for the privileged unless we intentionally read Dreher uncharitably. We can be uncharitable by assuming that Dreher's promotion of free enterprise at the political level means an opposition to personal generosity, but, as Robert pointed out, I don't think the one entails the other. At face value, a preference for free enterprise has to do with balancing government interventions in the marketplace; this doesn't oppose the idea of Christians voluntarily pooling their resources for their common good.

More importantly, though, critiques of Dreher for failing to account for vibrant urban communities stand at some degree of tension with the notion that the BenOp is only an option for the privileged. Dreher has spoken approvingly of Shane Claiborne and the new monasticism movement (even if he's skeptical of broader progressive adoption of the BenOp), and it's hard to think of Claiborne's group as being exclusive to the privileged. Similarly, although the Reformed enclaves with which many of us are familiar certainly enjoy some degree of wealth and privilege, that was not always the case. I'll leave it to others if they'd like to argue that things in America are much different today, but if it was possible for blue collar immigrant communities to form BenOp-ish communities 50-100 years ago, such potential isn't precluded today. We don't have to agree that the BenOp is the path to take (I do have my questions about some aspects), but it doesn't seem accurate to me to say that it's a path predicated on economic privilege.

iAt Book Club: The Benedict Option (part 6)

Robert Lancaster

Thanks everyone for your thoughtful responses thus far. I wish I would have read Gustavo's and Erin's responses before writing my first one—I might have said some completely different things. After reading all the responses, it seems that Donald and I are most sympathetic to

Dreher's proposal, but I suspect we would both be able to find some things with which we'd take issue, whether in the diagnosis or the actual solution (or "Option") that the book proposes. I'll leave it to Donald to confirm or disagree.

As with all the responses in this series, please excuse my inability to address every aspect of the book in the way that a more traditional book review would. I am sure there is much more that all of us could say about this book, given a different format. And, just because I don't say it doesn't mean that it is not important. What I offer here, largely, are thoughts in development. Most of what I say will likely not be what I say finally on this important book. I'm open to pushback. I want to make sure that I get Dreher right, even while hearing out the many voices who, for one reason or another, have found reasons to take issue with (and/or raise criticism of) his book.

As I think more about Donald's discussion of metaphorical differences (Smith vs. Dreher), I tend to believe that the discussion might be a reason for some disagreement. Might not other differences be: journalist vs. academic, and Catholic/Orthodox vs. Kuyperian/Reformed? Would the Two-Kingdoms crowd fall closer to the side of Dreher, Smith, or somewhere else? This, too, is one place where it would help to get a diversity of voices, from both minority group churches in the United States and the global church. The concerns of Evangelical Christians in the United States are different than the concerns of Christians in the Global South, for example. It's not as though things have always been good for all Christians in the United States and have only now taken a turn for the worse.

Scott, too, has provided us with much to consider, including an important outlook at historical context. His reminder that people have been living the Benedictine way at many times and in many styles throughout history is one that keeps coming up in most reviews of the BenOp, and it's one that is helpful for us to remember. I grew up in the PCA in the South, and although we did not incorporate every practice that Dreher recommends, we did adopt many of them. Culture has, of course (even in the South), changed since then.

One aspect of Scott's piece that I want to mention is his idea that what Dreher proposes is actually closer to an Anabaptist Hutterite *Bruderhof* than a Benedictine cloister. I'd say this is correct...his proposal seems similar to any Amish community, for that matter. These groups have adopted most of Dreher's practices, but they are not walled off from the world. However, their liturgy – at least the Amish worship I've experienced – would likely not be up to snuff with someone who prefers the liturgy of Rome or Constantinople.

As I said, I think Scott is right. However, I am not as convinced as Scott and Erin that "a champion of free enterprise like Dreher" would completely reject a sharing of all things in common. He might not embrace it to the extent the *Bruderhof* do, but it's likely that he would be closer to it than many Western Christians who have wedded themselves to a materialistic culture. I will admit that Scott and Erin are probably more right than wrong about Dreher's free market thought influencing his ideas. Still, I think that for most of us, embracing the call of Dreher will demand some economic sacrifice. Where his proposal misses the mark is that the

sacrifices can more easily be made by people in the middle and upper class than others. Not everyone can afford to send their children to classical school, or to pull one parent out of the workforce in order to begin the homeschooling. However, many families that could do so might balk at Dreher because they have become accustomed to their lifestyle above their faith. I saw such situations when I was church planting; sometimes people told me that they would frequently miss worship or could not afford to support the ministries of the church because they had to take advantage of their three country club memberships, or a vacation to their second home in the mountains. Granted, this was a small minority of people. But even with that being said, this criticism from Scott and Erin is, I think, justified. Dreher's plan is an "option" for certain people, but certainly not for all. I wonder if, after some of the criticism he has received, Dreher would edit anything from the book. I'd be curious to see what changes he would make if he were ever to rewrite it for a second edition.

Gustavo makes an important point, as I might recall noting in my first response. Dreher and Smith discussed mostly the diagnosis, at least in reference to the *Washington Post* piece. I'd be interested in how the social-structural account of race plays into the BenOp—that is the lifestyle to which Dreher calls us. I recognize that for many people who have historically been in the minority, many of the disciplines Dreher proposes are not at all new. But is there more than that?

There's more to say, but I've already said more at this point than I intended to. I'm eager to hear what others think.