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The Benedict Option, Our Cultural Task, and the Call to Consistent Discipleship



by Keith Sewell

Rod Dreher published *The Benedict Option* in March 2017.¹ Its purpose and contents are indicated in the sub-title: *A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. As is usual in North America, Dreher engaged in an extensive round of speaking engagements, advocating his thesis, at the time of publication. Some presentations are still available on YouTube. The book caused a stir among some evangelicals, who viewed it as a call to abandon engagement with contemporary western culture, not least from waging the “culture wars,” and to retreat into old or new modes of monasticism.²

Dreher has undergone his own spiritual journey. He quit evangelicalism to become a Catholic

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and from that point found his way into Eastern Orthodoxy. His use of monasticism, and specifically that of the Benedictine Order, and especially his endorsement of some examples of monasticism itself, has perhaps minimized the effectiveness of his message for those protestant Christians still intent on cultural engagement. Nevertheless, Dreher has written a book that should drive all Christians to sit up and pay attention.

Certainly, the monastic spirit is a long way from the “all of life is religion” full-orbed Christianity that some readers of this publication will associate with the life and work of H. Evan Runner (1916-2002). However, it is never wise to rush to judgment. Dreher has a deep sense of what Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) called *the antithesis*. Indeed, at some points, Dreher’s language can remind us of Evan Runner at his most emphatic:

...no matter what a Christian’s circumstances, he cannot live faithfully if God is only part of his life, bracketed away from the rest. In the end, either Christ is at the center of our lives, or the Self and all its idolatries are. There is no middle ground. (75-76)

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that Dreher, influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre, certainly contemplates a “strategic withdrawal” of Christians from at least some points of cultural engagement (2-4, 16-18).³ Nevertheless, in this discussion I will argue that a sympathetic reading of Dreher’s account of the condition and prospects of Christianity in the West does not lead inevitably

to the conclusion that Christians should disengage from cultural engagement. I will conclude that Dreher's candid and sobering account of the condition and circumstances of contemporary western Christianity speaks eloquently as to *the conditions under which any future engagement with the dominant culture will of necessity take place.*

So, what exactly is Dreher saying? What is his diagnosis of the present state and predicament of western Christianity—both Catholic and evangelical? Moreover, what is his prognosis? And, what remedies does he prescribe?

I

Dreher's diagnosis is stark and sobering. In short, he is saying that Christians in North America—particularly conservative Catholics and Evangelicals—have *lost* the “culture wars” that they waged for decades (9). The election of Donald Trump was a false dawn (3), and voting Republican is not the answer (8). Even where Christians have made gains, their advances have only been temporary and are insufficient to counter the deeper tide now running against them. To win an election is not to change a culture. Henceforth, and into the foreseeable future, Christians will need to entrench and hunker down, be much more intentional and purposeful about their faith, and ready themselves for marginalisation, discrimination, and persecution. If they do not do this, they will perish. At stake is nothing less than the survival of spiritually obedient orthodox Christianity in the West (3).

Dreher's discussion is based almost exclusively on observations drawn from contemporary American conditions. This is a weakness. If he had paid more attention to recent developments in the UK, Canada, and Australia, he could have greatly strengthened his argument at strategic points.

What we have here is a book written in American terms for an American readership, even as its central theses apply powerfully across the western world, and especially to the Anglophone countries.

To support his contention that Christians have *lost* the “culture wars,” Dreher cites the decision of the US Supreme Court in the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), which made clear that:

... Christians who hold to the biblical teaching about sex and marriage have the same status in culture, and increasingly in law, as racists. The culture war that began with the Sexual Revolution in the 1960s has now ended in defeat for Christian conservatives. The cultural left—which is to say, increasingly the American mainstream—has no intention of living in postwar peace. It is pressing forward with a harsh, relentless occupation, one that is aided by the cluelessness of Christians who don't understand what's happening. (3).

Dreher rightly emphasizes both the lack of awareness of Christians as to the strength and depth of the rejection of Christianity that has taken place, and the vehement animus of those who wish to eliminate what remains of the influence of Christianity in public life.

Dreher rightly emphasizes both the lack of awareness of Christians as to the strength and depth of the rejection of Christianity that has taken place, and the vehement animus of those who wish to eliminate what remains of the influence of Christianity in public life. He is not alone in this assessment.

In Australia the respected Catholic journalist Greg Sheridan has described the inadequacies of much Christian leadership by using the term “situational unawareness,” itself derived from military theory. Troops on the battlefield who are unaware of the situation they are actually in are at extreme peril of defeat if not annihilation.⁴ Sheridan had Catholic leaders primarily in view, but his sentiments are equally applicable to the evangelical leadership in many parts of the Anglophone world. They have repeatedly failed to grasp the religious

significance of culture, and now they are paying the price.

Evangelicals and conservative Catholics continue to tell themselves that so-called “same-sex marriage” (SSM) and the burgeoning LGBT agenda “have been imposed by a liberal elite,” because they find it hard to face the actual truth, which is that most of the “American people, either actively or passively, approve” (9). The reality is that evangelicals no longer lead a silent or any other sort of majority (86). All too often those who present themselves as offering Christian leadership exhibit a serious level of spiritual and cultural naivety. Such “leadership” underestimates what lies before us in an era in which the historic Judaeo-Christian understanding of marriage as an exclusive life-long union between one man and one woman is now considered an “abominable prejudice” meriting “punishment” (9). Moreover, there are increasing indications that Christians will not be permitted to quietly dissent from the new order. Militant “Gay Pride,” “trans-gender” and other such “activists” are out to take down and take out of public and commercial life all those who do not positively endorse their “lifestyles.” This is a far cry from a new or expanding pluralism; on the contrary, it amounts to a multi-faceted project to impose a “new morality” on the culture generally.

By now we are all familiar with court cases such as those involving Christian cake makers who, while they do not decline to serve practicing homosexual customers, do decline to provide a wording on their product that *prima facie* endorses SSM. After the legalization of SSM, the LGBT lobby, in and beyond North America, has not gone away. On the contrary, it has increased its activities as a highly energised nexus of forces intent on imposing its agenda and its “new morality” on the western world generally. It has very largely succeeded. For example, massive changes have come in both once Catholic Ireland and once Presbyterian Scotland.

In many jurisdictions “anti-hate” laws proscribe “hate speech,” which may be considered to have been uttered where a claim is made that the speech was offensive. This is extraordinarily dangerous. Such laws assume that everyone has a “right” not to be offended. In the long run such laws stand to undermine free speech itself—and that includes the

preaching of the gospel. If a preacher of the Word of God says, “you are a sinner and you need to repent of your sins,” and if the hearer of this message takes offense, it is the preacher who is likely to be shut down one way or another.

This is no exaggeration, as those familiar with the Israel Folau case in Australia will appreciate. Folau lost his livelihood as a professional rugby player because on social media he referred to passages from Scripture that referred to the judgment of God on sexual immorality. He did not focus on “gay” sexual behavior exclusively. In relevant exchanges Folau referred to I Cor 6:9-10 and Gal 5:19-21. In the UK, organizations such as “Christian Concern” regularly report that persons who affirm the traditional Judaeo-Christian view of marriage and biblical teaching on sexual morality are liable to find themselves in court, or excluded from their profession by governing bodies, or perhaps find the police at their front door wanting to “check their thinking.” Such claims are becoming all too frequent.

The state that claims to control speech is that state that *de facto* is seeking to control thought and belief also. All this portends a future in which Christians cannot assume that they will be allowed to stand in the public square on an equal footing alongside everyone else. They may now find themselves disbarred from formal public life on account of their alleged “hate speech.”

At the same time the “new morality” mantra of “equality, diversity, and inclusion” has entered the discourse of many main-line protestant denominations. Many evangelicals lack the discernment to address the situation effectively. I have heard Galatians 3:28—“all one in Christ Jesus”—used to justify “diversity and inclusion” in the church, and therefore the inclusion of those engaging in homosexual conduct. Such misuse of Scripture is stunning. The passage itself refers to the *unity* of God’s people in Christ. It does not legitimize sinful conduct by professing Christians. Paul, in contrast, repeatedly and emphatically contrasts the marks of Christian life and conduct (2 Cor 6:6-7, 8:7; Gal 5:22-23; Phil 4:8-9; Col 3:12-15) with the ways of sin and rebellion exhibited by those living without hope (1 Cor 5:9-13; 6: 9-11; 2 Cor 12:20-21; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 4:17-19; 5:3-5; Col 3:5-8). Paul

leaves us in do doubt that the gospel points us to the kingdom of God *and its righteousness*—it does not include the option of “alternative lifestyles” that some now demand the church bless and legitimize.

Of course, situations vary across states and jurisdictions, but Dreher is right to warn us that those who want to confine and eventually silence the Christian voice are closing in on us. Some years ago I engaged in a little exercise, just to see what the result would look like. I took the 1961 “Statement of the Principles and General Political Program of the Anti-Revolutionary Program” of the old Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands, as translated by Bernard Zylstra (1934-86), and re-cast it in terms of the public life of the Commonwealth of Australia.⁵ I was encouraged to find that in many respects, the guiding principles of Kuyper’s old party had stood the test of time. The statement exhibits wisdom, insight, understanding, and compassion. Yet I was left wondering what the courts might now make of such a statement. After all, it exclusively affirms the Judaeo-Christian view of marriage and the family, and in this and other respects it might be construed as “discriminatory” or “hate speech,” by the LGBT lobby and its supporters.

The presumed “silent majority” of yesteryear no longer exists—if it was ever there in the first place. In countries such as the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, the “new morality”—which in many respects represents a resurgence of the old paganism—has received majority support. In Australia this was confirmed by a nationwide government-conducted poll held on November 14, 2017, on so-called “same sex marriage.” The vote was 61.6% in favour and 38.4% against. Since the passing of SSM legislation, freedom of religion has become an issue in Australian politics. The position of Christians and Christian institutions in relation to anti-discrimination and “hate crime” laws is an unresolved issue. There are those who wish to silence all Christian voices.

The rising tide of western paganism is evident on all sides, in public assertions of “Gay Pride,”

and also in the ever-extending legalization of late-term abortion and the increasing practice of legalized euthanasia. Perhaps legal infanticide and the eventual acceptance of paedophilia await us down the proverbial track. The rise of now mainstream neo-paganism threatens us with terrible outcomes. The increasing vogue of so-called “extreme fighting sports” may eventually take us to the return of gladiatorial “fight to the death” combat. An increasingly strident full-frontal paganism stares us in the face, with its culture of disfigurement and death. Those Christians ready to stand against the tide, warns Dreher, should prepare for hard times (89).

Furthermore, many evangelicals, in their opposition to socialism, have tended to assume that big business is their friend. They are wrong. Pro-LGBT thinking has penetrated the boardrooms and personnel departments of many large and not so large corporations. Dreher warns, “Everyone working for a major corporation will be frog-marched through ‘diversity and inclusion’ training and will face pressure not simply to tolerate LGBT co-workers but to affirm their sexuality and gender identity” (181). To submit to such training, he warns, is the twenty-first century equivalent to “burning incense to Caesar” (181-3). Dreher summarizes the emerging Christian predicament as follows:

While Christians may not be persecuted for their faith per se, they are already being targeted when they stand for what their faith entails, especially in matters of sexuality. As the LGBT agenda advances, broad interpretations of anti-discrimination laws are going to push traditional Christians increasingly out of the market-place, and the corporate world will become hostile toward Christian bigots, considering them a danger to the working environment. (179)

Accordingly, Dreher argues that this is now the time to be done with past illusions, and—also in the realm of education—to confront the unpalat-

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able realities of a new era:

The practical challenges facing us are unlike any that most believers in this country have ever dealt with. Schools and colleges—morally, spiritually, and vocationally—will have to prepare young believers for some increasingly harsh realities. Because of florists, bakers, and photographers having been dragged through the courts by gay plaintiffs, we now know that some Orthodox Christians will lose their businesses and their livelihoods if they refuse to recognise the new secular orthodoxies. We can expect that many more Christians will be denied employment opportunities by licencing or other professional requirements, because they have been driven out of certain workplaces by outright bigotry or by dint of the fact that they cannot in good conscience work in certain fields. (175).

The force of these tendencies is so great that they will seek Christians out whether they like it or not, and there will be no sitting on the fence. There will be no room for the pretence that we can serve two masters (Matt 6:24). Those who profess the faith will either acquiesce or stand firm (Eph 6:13).

II

In the face of all this, Dreher's expectation is that, unless there are serious changes, the greater part of professing Christianity in North America and Europe is headed for extinction (8). As matters stand, western churches are not up to the challenges they are facing. Western Christians have been much more deeply influenced by the processes of secularization than they realise (44). Even in the U. S. A., many churches have lost their 18 to 29 demographic (9, 166). Moreover, Dreher reminds us that the promise of Matthew 16:18—"the gates of hell will not prevail"—is given to the church universal and does not apply specifically to Christianity in the West (5). The candlesticks are removable (Rev 2:5).

So what, precisely, is wrong with western Christianity? Here Dreher encounters a serious difficulty. When addressing a topic as variegated as western Christianity, generalization is difficult and can sometimes be seriously misrepresentative. There are exceptions to the general trend, present in various denominations and settings, and throughout his book Dreher offers examples of these as ex-

emplifying a kind of "Benedict option" initiatives he recommends. They provide examples of the kind of action needful in these "darkening days," during which "we are going to have to be the church, without compromise, no matter what it costs" (3). Dreher's focus on Benedict of Nursia (480-543) has arisen because he sees Christianity in the West as now entering an era comparable to its days under pagan Rome or after the barbarian invasions of the West (12-15).

In the present era, the overall picture is of a western Christianity that has already accommodated itself, or is in the process of doing so, if it has not already fully succumbed to, the LGBT reconstruction of society. It is the case that many evangelical churches (unlike their more liberal counterparts) are not as yet fully accepting of the LGBT agenda. However, their own compromises with the prevailing *Zeitgeist* serve to set them on such a path. Dreher succinctly describes the predicament of much contemporary evangelicalism:

Too many churches have succumbed to modernity, rejecting the wisdom of past ages, treating worship as a consumer activity, and allowing parishioners to function as unaccountable, atomised members. The sad truth is, when the world sees us, it often fails to see anything different from nonbelievers. Christians often talk about "reaching the culture" without realizing that, having no distinct Christian culture of their own, they have been co-opted by the secular culture they wished to evangelize. (102).

Especially in respect of public worship, Dreher's observations are an indictment of what goes on week by week in many evangelical churches, and not only those of the full charismatic or megachurch variety. In the name of being "seeker sensitive," such churches have surrendered much to the spirit of the age. One has witnessed the spectacle of fervent preachers lamenting the growing worldliness of their own congregations, even as they have permitted contemporary pop-culture to permeate their "praise and worship." Obsessed with metrics and branding, such churches readily descend to the banal. Many evangelicals have yet to learn that *instrumental music is never religiously neutral*, and that they undermine the faith if they import into

the church the musical styles of the disco and rock concert, even if they then add “sacred” words to the “production.” Dreher has the measure of such folly:

Every time the church embraces a new fad, especially trends that turn worship into electronic spectacle, it yields more of its soul Before long ... the church becomes fully possessed by the spirit of this world. Authentic orthodox Christianity can in no way be reconciled with the Zeitgeist. (235, cf. 218-21)

There are evangelicals who will respond to those who continue to withstand their post-1960s musical innovations by saying something like “at least we are preaching the gospel.” Alas, that is only sometimes true. As Dreher rightly observes (11-12, 235), in many evangelical (and Catholic) settings, presentations of the gospel have elided into what Smith and Denton have termed “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD).

The chief features of this pseudo-gospel—which is no gospel at all—are as follows:

(1) A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth. (2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. (3) The central goal of life is to feel good about oneself. (4) God does not need to be practically involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. (5) Good people go to heaven when they die.⁶

The point has been rightly made: this is *not* the religion of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563),⁷ which commences:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.

Time and again the Protestant Reformation provides us with a better guide to the gospel than contemporary evangelicalism. MTD is not the gospel; it is a reflection of contemporary narcissism. Dreher’s warning to western Christians is stark: “If you do not change your ways, you are going to die, and so will what’s left of the Christian faith in our civilization.” (101)

III

According to Dreher, there may be a hidden blessing in the emerging crisis, as it may yet drive us to manifest an improvement in the evident quality of our Christian living (19, 117-9). In the West, Christ-followers are already enduring discrimination, and it is possible that this will deepen into persecution. The contemporary West is not a “safe haven” for Christianity. It is now “hostile territory.” The mettle of our discipleship is going to be tested. Just to survive, Christians will need to be much more committed and intentional—and this will require that church discipline, catechizing, and Christian education be taken much more seriously than is the contemporary norm.

Christians who owe a lot to Reformed teaching and practice will find much to agree with in Dreher’s prescriptions for our present ills. He echoes much that, it must be said, was more prominent in the lives of the Reformed folk of yesteryear. He commends a more communal and less individualistic outlook; a more orderly approach to Christian life and worship; a willingness to be more ascetic and deny ourselves; a long-term view of our calling to discipleship; an aversion to self-promotion; the practice of household hospitality; and the cultivation of the kind of wisdom that brings forth prudence, mercy, and discernment in difficult and adverse circumstances (54-74).

For Dreher the institutional church is not itself in a healthy condition. He views much that cur-

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rently afflicts the West, and the western church, as having arisen from the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s. In the West an array of interlocking movements has undermined and then cast aside the (hitherto regarded as normative) Judaeo-Christian understanding of marriage as a lifelong union between one man and one woman and the repudiation of homosexual conduct (201-4). This general declension has also entered the church. And so for Dreher, “a real work of cultural reclamation and renewal, not outside the church but *inside* the church,” needs to take place as a priority “before we can think about much longer-term goals” (85).

What Dreher does not make clear is how the required “reclamation and renewal” might be achieved in the face of what remains in many situations entrenched clerical resistance and undermining. Time and again in recent decades, lay people have stood up and publicly defended the teaching of Christ and his apostles on marriage and sexual conduct, only to be undermined in the media and elsewhere by prominent ecclesiastical leaders. The treatment of Andrea Williams of “Christian Concern” by the bishops of the Church of England is a clear example.

Across the church Dreher calls for a recovery of ordered liturgical worship (105-113). His point is well made. When viewing much contemporary Protestantism, we easily forget that the churches of the Reformation largely retained and reformed liturgical modes of worship. The contemporary “I’m thrilled to see everyone here this morning, has anyone had a birthday this week?” approach to worship would have been anathema to the Reformers. The church is not there to provide a consumer experience but to worship the living God (132). In Dreher’s view the removal of digital technology from public worship would be step in the right direction (231-2).

Also, in many evangelical settings, we encounter a kind of preaching that is seriously below par. Just like the worship style, it infantilizes congregants rather than building them up. A preaching style that is a mixture of fireside chat and emotive rant may synchronise well with the MTD pseudo-gospel, but it is no substitute for the kind of preaching that spans Old and New Testaments alike and applies the whole Word to the whole of life.

Dreher wants a visible church, congregation by congregation, that stands in a much clearer contrast to the surrounding (increasingly neo-pagan) culture of the West. The church needs once again to take church discipline seriously (115-7)—another historically Reformed theme. Dreher is well aware of the scourge of pornography (214-7), but he does not dilate on the many cases of clergy sexual abuse (including paedophilia) that have come to light in recent decades. In my experience, many clergy continue to under-estimate the degree to which this has all but destroyed the moral authority of the churches worldwide.

Moreover, Dreher reminds us that a truly distinctive Christianity can be attractive to those who tire of the emptiness of a crass materialism and who are seeking permission to live wholesome lives (96). For such reasons, he urges, that the churches should be finder-friendly rather than seeker-friendly (121).

From the protestant point of view, Dreher can be seen as being hampered by his assumptions concerning the necessity of a sacerdotal priesthood. On that view, there can be no functioning church without a priesthood ordained by bishops. Protestants, who have a different view of the ministerial office, are not so constrained—although they certainly have other problems. Where the existing denominations have ceased to function in rural areas, or where new churches cannot be constructed in urban areas because of zoning laws or for other reasons, Christians who do not wish to become “Sunday commuters” can find themselves reflecting on the possibilities of an *ecclesia* without buildings and without clergy, being adverse to sectarianism, and exhibiting full confessional integrity by affirming the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds in their historic sense.

Such an *ecclesia* would need to be geared for survival in the face of persecution and for growth in what could prove to be a protracted period of adversity. Dreher’s particular ecclesiastical orientation would seem to militate against such possibilities. He is perhaps too inclined to see matters in either churchly or para-church terms. Arguably, protestants who have resolved to resist the materialism and secularism of our era, along with its moral—including sexual—antinomianism, and armed with their understanding of the priesthood of all

believers, could prove themselves more flexible and more durable in trying times.

Matters of institutional church polity are not central to Dreher's agenda. His warnings and recommendations arise from his contention that *both* conservative Catholic *and* evangelical endeavours at the national level—remember the “moral majority”—have repeatedly *failed*:

For decades conservative Christians have behaved as if the primary threats to the integrity of families and communities could be effectively addressed through politics. That illusion is now destroyed. If there is going to be authentic renewal, it will have to happen in families and local church communities. (123)

Dreher sees the family as a bastion of Christian worship and resilience. Without idolizing the family, the household should be a place of hospitality and learning. The Christian home should be an exceptional place—a clear alternative to the neo-pagan milieu. Whereas “new morality” teachings and LGBT ideologies have undermined the Judaeo-Christian standpoint for decades, there now needs to be a recovery of Christian sexual ethics and conduct. For starters, Christian parents should take the lead in being the principal instructors of their children in sexual matters (205-29). This will take discipline and resolve. For example, if the Christian family and home is to flourish, we may need to learn a measure of “digital fasting” so as to free ourselves from the myriad distractions of the “digital age.” Those who take Christian nurture seriously will keep smart phones out of the hands of their children (226-31).

Beyond the family lies the community, which Dreher views primarily in local terms. Christians need to be more locally minded. Where Christians are being edged out of the professions—and this process is underway in various countries—more Christians will become involved in the trades rather

than the professions (232-6). Christians will need to support Christian enterprises in their locality, even as they find themselves becoming poorer and more marginalized (183-92). They will need to live in closer communion with other Christians in their immediate locality, irrespective of their denominational affiliations (122-43). Dreher expects a new kind of ecumenism to emerge from the ground up. Under the pressure of mutually experienced anti-Christian discrimination, Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox will find themselves drawn—or even thrown—together (4-5). Christians from these great traditions will learn to reach across denominational boundaries (136-8), especially as they learn to collaborate at the local level in order to achieve specific objectives (87, 136-8).

This will make some Protestants nervous—perhaps fearing a ploy to undo the Reformation. Here we should recall that Dreher is Orthodox rather than Catholic, and while Protestants have their criticisms of Eastern Orthodoxy, we ought also to recognise that it is among us as a long-standing tradition that has withstood the furnace of Islam and the icy blast of communist totalitarianism.

Dreher's ground-up, on-the-spot ecumenism is not an attempt to intrude papal authority on non-Catholics but arises from his awareness that the Holy Spirit may use circumstances of marginalization and oppression to bring, perhaps drive, us together.

It is also worth remembering that there is a long-standing line of thought among Protestants recognizing that, on the core truths of the faith, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism are in agreement. What we hold in common is much greater than those matters that divide us. We all say the Ecumenical Creeds. C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) expressed this fundamental unity as “Mere Christianity.” On this matter, Lewis was influenced by Richard Baxter (1615-91), the English

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Puritan.⁸ Baxter deplored the divisions among the Christians of his day and was content to call himself a “Catholic Christian.”⁹

Dreher says that our priority should now be to build, from the ground up, communities, networks, and institutions that can out-manoeuvre the increasingly oppressive left-liberal hegemony (84)—or at least give it the slip (12). Even as older ways of doing things are stifled or have run their course, new opportunities may emerge (173). In the emerging circumstances, Christians in the West need to study the examples provided by Czech dissidents and Polish Catholics in the days when they struggled and survived under Communist repression (91-8, 144-5).

This emphasis on the local and the “grass roots” does not preclude possible wider action. Christians may still write (no pro-forma letters please) to their federal and state representatives (87), and they should certainly join with others to preserve and uphold free speech (84). After all, if free speech is not upheld and protected, the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom may be constantly in jeopardy. If preaching the Word of God is constantly endangered by the law of the land (in the name of suppressing “hate speech”), we will have entered Acts 5:29 territory—“we ought to obey God rather than men”—and will need to brace ourselves accordingly.

Christians in Reformed traditions, and especially those in the CRCNA and comparable denominations, will be heartened by the high priority that Dreher awards to Christian education. He is clear that education is at the core of Christian survival. It should be a high familial priority and is essential for the trans-generational transmission of the Christian faith and inheritance (147-50). Not least, it is here that the history of western civilization should be taught (152-5). Conversely, Christians should withdraw their children from state secular schools. The line that children from evangelical homes should be “salt and light” in state schools is at best ill advised—typically they are utterly unprepared to address the ideologies that now prevail (155-8). Yet here also Dreher has things to say that will give many advocates of Christian education cause to pause. He does not want us to be starry-eyed about Christian schools—some have only a

thin Christian veneer (158-9). Dreher suggests that home schooling might be the answer (165-6). Not all will agree, but emerging conditions might well prompt more parents to adopt that course, perhaps as part of local collaborative groupings.

Among the serious challenges confronting Christian schools and colleges is the ever-present issue of accreditation. Where jurisdictions have acceded to the demands of the LGBT lobby that “discrimination” (meaning opposition to LGBT “lifestyles”) be eradicated from public life, then accreditation becomes, in effect, weaponized. If Christian educational institutions do not submit to the new mandated “morality” (including accepting LGBT lifestyles on campus, and perhaps also amongst faculty and staff), then accreditation may be wholly or partly withheld. It is hard not to see this as a kind of blackmail, or at least a legally sanctioned strong-arm tactic.

Dreher wrote his *Benedict Option* at a time when developments at Trinity Western University (TWU) were only in their earlier stages (182). After the book’s publication, TWU felt obliged, under pressure, to set aside its hitherto mandatory “Community Covenant” (CC), which required that staff and students adhere to a Christian standard of sexual morality. The British Columbia Court of Appeal described the CC as “deeply discriminatory” to the LGBT persons. The TWU acquiesced and abandoned the CC in respect of students, rather than lose accreditation for its law school.¹⁰ However, I understand that the CC remains in force for faculty and staff, and it remains to be seen if in the long run LGBT activists will again assail TWU either in or out of the courts. All this transpired notwithstanding cogent representations made by the Association for Reformed Political Action (ARPA).¹¹

These are heavy matters. Christian institutions of all sorts stand, sooner or later, to find themselves assailed for alleged discriminatory policies and/or hate speech. Many evangelicals have been seriously naïve concerning developments in the humanities and social sciences departments in recent decades. They have been slow to appreciate how the “equality, diversity, and inclusion” mantra, once instantiated in law, can be used against them—even in their own educational institutions. Situations might arise where the

administrations may wish to acquiesce in order to stay in business, while faculty and others might wish to resist—accepting the harder path of discipleship even where it incurs a loss of accreditation. Amid confusion and tension, with insecurity mounting, it cannot be expected that conscientious people will always agree. As it is, large areas of contemporary higher education have become deeply compromised by casualization, financialization, debt, grade inflation, and a host of other ills. Christian colleges are not immune (171-2).

It is possible that Christian scholars, in one field or another, will gradually detach themselves from existing institutions in order to be free to think, research and write. Perhaps such a process is already underway. Dreher calls for the creation of a “Christian academic counterculture” (171). He is right, and it is most likely that creative alternatives are emerging even now as the present order declines under the weight of compounding difficulties.

IV

When Dreher calls for Christian education, he tends to have Classical Christian Schools principally in mind (146, 160-5). He concurs with the criticisms of “modern” education made by Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957) after the Second World War (160). However, his emphasis on “the classical” points to a serious difficulty in the fabric of his thinking. The history of western civilization may be seen as a constant interaction between two powerful culturally formative forces: the Greco-Roman and the Judaeo-Christian. In our understanding of the history of western civilization and of Christianity, much depends on the degree to which these two forces are seen as either compatible or antithetical one to another.

Dreher sees the history of Christianity very much in Catholic-Orthodox terms. If he has an ideal, it is that of Christendom in the medieval era (22-29). Philosophically that period came to an end with William of Oakham (1285-1347) and the rise of nominalism (27-9). Thereafter Dreher sees the de-

cline of western Christianity as beginning with the Renaissance and the Reformation (23, 29-32, 45). These, and the conflicts they generated, opened the door to the Enlightenment, modernity, and eventually the 1960s sexual revolution (32-40). These views, admittedly summarized briefly here, may be contested on a Christian basis. After all, Christian unity was not shattered by the Reformation, as it had already been lost because of divisions with the Orthodox and Coptic East. Martin Luther (1483-1546) never sought to divide the church: he sought to reform it and repeatedly called for a council of the church. Moreover, Hellenic thinking did not enter the West with the Renaissance, as Dreher seems to suggest at one point (30); rather, in its Platonic and later Aristotelian forms it permeated Christian-medieval thinking throughout the Middle Ages.

Dreher, I suggest, rather too easily glides past this issue because his view of the faith is bound up with his commitment to metaphysical realism (27). This is a key point, for it is the repeated (attempted) synthesis of the faith with thinking that is

not rooted in the Word of God. This synthesis has, in the course of history, repeatedly vitiated the faith and undermined our Christian witness—the precise state of affairs that concerns Dreher so deeply. Those who have discerned the deeper significance of the Calvinistic Reformation have adopted a more critical stance towards the medieval synthesis, and they were right to do so.¹²

Dreher is right to emphasise that Christians urgently need to recover a fuller understanding of the Christian past (102-5, 173). Indeed. And such a re-reading, researching, and re-writing of the history of Christianity should seek to understand the ways in which the integrity of the faith has been repeatedly undermined through accommodation with ideas and practices arising from (pagan) Greco-Roman culture. The problems that Dreher discerns reach deep into Christian history, not only in the Medieval period but even earlier. We should not abandon, but neither should we improperly vener-

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ate, the traditional Christianity we have inherited. It remains true that we are not subject to the tradition but to the Word of God.

Whatever our reservations might be, it cannot be denied that Dreher has presented Western Catholics and Protestants with an incisive and timely challenge. It is entirely possible that the degree to which they decline to respond positively to this challenge will be the degree to which they will not survive the coming decades. We are already much circumscribed and undermined by the dominant *Zeitgeist*. Christians of Reformed persuasion would be wise to take Dreher seriously. We too are not immune (1 Cor 10:12).

His warnings do not override or rescind our cultural task—what the old Calvinists called the “cultural mandate.” They do point to the circumstances in which we are likely to receive and fulfil that calling. The task might become increasingly tough amid increasing misrepresentation and obstruction. And, to be clear, while I would not want to see Christians withdraw from any wise political endeavour at the federal level, there is important insight in what Dreher has to say about Christians uniting at the local level to promote public justice and good governance.

Dreher challenges us to address the depth, breadth and quality of our discipleship. That is always important, especially as we now seem to be entering an era when we will be tried, tested, and sifted. Of the existing structures of Christian endeavor, some will endure and mature while others will succumb and perish. The discipleship of Christian institutions of higher education will also be tried, tested, and sifted. In all of this, come what may, the words of the Master remain true: “In this world you will have tribulation, but do not fear, for I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Endnotes

1. New York: Penguin Random House, 2017. All page references in the text are to this edition. Dreher uses the abbreviation “LGBT”

throughout. Since publication the expanded “LGBTQI” [Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex] has increased in usage.

2. See, for example, J.D. Hall, *The Benedict Arnold Option: Why Christians Must Not Retreat from the Culture Wars* (Cross and Crown Books, 2017).
3. See especially Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
4. Greg Sheridan. *God is Good for You: A Defence of Christianity in Troubled Times*. Sydney (Allen and Unwin, 2018), 318.
5. This statement is reprinted in E.L. Hebden Taylor, *The Christian Philosophy of Law, Politics and the State* (Nutley NJ: Craig Press, 1966), 633-642.
6. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-3.
7. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 146-8.
8. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Revised and Amplified) (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), v-xii.
9. Richard Baxter, *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* [1650], edited by John T. Wilkinson (London: The Epworth Press, 1962), 78-9, and *Autobiography* [1696], edited by J.M. Lloyd Thomas. London: Dent, 1925), 116-119, 120-123, 135-140.
10. “Trinity Western University’s community covenant no longer mandatory,” *Vancouver Sun*, August 15, 2018.
11. See ARPA Canada’s *Legal Arguments in Trinity Western University v. the Law Societies of British Columbia and Ontario* (Ottawa: Association for Reformed Political Action, December 2017).
12. D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, *The Problem Historical Method and the History of Philosophy*, edited by Kornelis A. Bril (Amstelveen: De Zaak Haes, 2005), 61-69, and Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Roots of Western Culture* (Toronto: Wedge, 1979), 111-137.