

Why I Have Mixed Feelings About Rod Dreher's *Benedict Option*

I'm thrilled that the *The Benedict Option*, the new book by the well-known conservative journalist Rod Dreher, is getting an immediate national hearing, and deservedly so. Dreher brings an urgent word at an urgent time, stating in no uncertain terms that we are in a spiritual and cultural crisis of monumental, historic proportions. Let the wake-up call be sounded! At the same time, Dreher conveys a spiritual pessimism that seems to deny the possibility of an imminent, culture-shaking revival, as if there can be no great awakening in this generation. Says who?

To be sure, Dreher's book is filled with godly wisdom and Christian challenge, calling on believers to reassess what it means to be followers of Jesus in a very worldly world and encouraging all of us who live in America to recognize the great differences that often exist between biblical faith and political conservatism.

And, to repeat, his warnings to American (and European) Christians are urgent and necessary, as he writes, "There are people alive today who may live to see the effective death of Christianity within our civilization. By God's mercy, the faith may continue to flourish in the Global South and China, but barring a dramatic reversal of current trends, it will all but disappear entirely from Europe and North America. This may not be the end of the world, but it is the end of a world, and only the willfully blind would deny it. For a long time we have downplayed or ignored the signs. Now the floodwaters are upon us—and we are not ready."

Yes, he continues, "The storm clouds have been gathering for

decades, but most of us believers have operated under the illusion that they would blow over. The breakdown of the natural family, the loss of traditional moral values, and the fragmenting of communities—we were troubled by these developments but believed they were reversible and didn't reflect anything fundamentally wrong with our approach to faith. Our religious leaders told us that strengthening the levees of law and politics would keep the flood of secularism at bay. The sense one had was: There's nothing here that can't be fixed by continuing to do what Christians have been doing for decades—especially voting for Republicans.”

Certainly, this needs to be said, and we must feel the weight of these words. Indeed, if we had been listening carefully, we would have heard Christian leaders like Francis Schaeffer telling us decades ago (even in the late '70s) that we had become a post-Christian society, prompting him to write his Christian Manifesto, among other relevant works.

From my perspective, though, the problem remains the same now as then; it has just become more acute. That also means that the solution remains the same; it is just more desperately needed.

That solution is a massive spiritual awakening that produces a gospel-based moral and cultural revolution, and it is for that awakening and revolution that I live every day of my life.

So I differ with Dreher when he states that, “Nobody but the most deluded of the old-school religious right believes that this cultural revolution can be turned back. The wave cannot be stopped, only ridden.”

Actually, I know many thousands of fervent young people—they are anything but “the old-school Religious Right”—who are praying and fasting and believing and striving for a massive turning in their generation, like 16-year-old Autumn, who joined me on the radio this week to explain why her generation

is “the pro-life generation.”

And there is a whole generation of homeschooled kids who are growing up today with a strong counter-culture mentality, not easily swayed by their peers, and their numbers are growing, not declining. Will they have no discernible impact in the days ahead?

And what of the fact that the left keeps getting more extreme, from the latest examples of transanity to the latest examples of college campus PC madness? Will not this produce a cultural pushback?

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

But who can really live like this? When the moral confrontation comes to your place of business, to your school, to your family, to your life, to your church, do you simply retreat and say, “I surrender my convictions and capitulate, seeing that there’s no way to turn the cultural tide”? God forbid.

I understand, of course, that Dreher is focusing on political battles and on political solutions to society’s deeper problems, and I concur with him that our energies must not primarily be spent there. But surely, if we don’t let our lights shine brightly and clearly in the culture, we will be held responsible by God for our nation’s even more rapid collapse. And how do we explain to our children that, due to our spiritual pessimism, we gave way to the flood, which has now swallowed their future as well?

I have been reminded by pro-life champions that things looked much worse for their movement in the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade* than they look for the pro-family movement in the aftermath of the 2015 *Obergefell* decision redefining marriage. Yet they didn't throw in the towel, and despite the horrible loss of more than 55 million babies, we continue to see pro-life gains to this day, with the possibility of the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* on the horizon.

Just as importantly, countless thousands of babies have been saved since 1973 because these pro-life warriors did not throw in the towel or drop out of the battle. Try telling the men and women and children who are alive today because of pro-life tenacity that it would have been better if these pro-lifers decided not to fight the abortion flood.

Again, I absolutely affirm Dreher's call for a return to a deeper biblical faith (after all, I wrote a book called *How Saved Are We?* in 1990) and the exhortation to build a real, at times hidden, counterculture society (after all, I've been preaching about a gospel-based revolution—hardly a light concept—since the late 1990s, saying that it must begin in the church).

Thus I embrace the strong challenges put forth in *The Benedict Option*, and I affirm many of the strategies. At the same time, I feel that now, more than ever, is the time for us to engage—meaning, engaging in personal repentance, engaging in prayer for awakening, engaging in unashamed evangelism, and engaging in confronting the culture, with pastors and Christian leaders taking the lead.

Later this year, Thomas Nelson will be publishing my newest book, *Saving a Sick America: A Prescription for Moral and Cultural Transformation*. In this book, I also lay out clearly the dire condition of our nation—in graphic and stark terms—but rather than seeing the current darkness as irreversible for the moment, I see it as the backdrop against

which our light can shine even more clearly.

That's why the last chapter of the book is titled "The Church's Great Opportunity." In it, I point back to past times in our national history, such as immediately before the Great Awakening in the 1700s, when Rev. Samuel Blair explained that, "Religion lay as it were dying, and ready to expire its last breath of life in this part of the visible church ..."

Then the awakening came, and the rest, as they say, is history.

So, while Dreher is writing about the rise and fall of America, I feel stirred to write about the fall and rise of America.

Am I wrong? {eoa}