

## **The Benedict Option, by Rod Dreher (Sentinel, 2017): Summary**

### Dreher's forward to new edition:

"only the most deluded of true believers can possibly believe that the Trump presidency heralds some kind of...Christian renaissance"

- \* Christians more worried than ever about the future: "fear that their young adult children will abandon the Christian faith"
- \* We can't "wait for secularist phase to pass" - pressure from the world getting worse, church structures and doctrine breaking down

BO not escape and retreat, but gaining space to regroup, re-train and re-engage, developing spiritual discipline and resilient community, for service and mission.

"Tradition not the worship of ashes but the preservation of fire".

### Intro: The awakening

US religious right against LGBT agenda and abortion, but uncritically accepting materialism and consumerism.

BO concept developed from prophecy by Alasdair MacIntyre 'After Virtue' - "full participation in mainstream society soon not possible for those living life of traditional virtue".

Recent trends:

- \* millennials abandoning Christian faith in unprecedented numbers
- \* sexual revolution "pressing ahead with harsh relentless occupation...aided by the cluelessness of Christians who don't understand what's happening"
- \* technology rapidly changing the way we live

What is required - not political solution, or just analysis and lament. Rather, urgent need for small communities of committed believers following a Rule.

### Chapter 1: The Great Flood

Spiritual crisis engulfing the West - worst since end of 5th century (Pope Benedict).

Public square lost for conservative Christian views since legalisation of same sex marriage.

Churches increasingly affected by liberalism and/or moral therapeutic deism and/or materialism.

We can't hold back the flood or keep it out with sandbags. Need an ark.

Example of Benedict starting order after Visigoth takeover of Rome -

Became a hermit after being appalled by immorality and corruption in Rome

Then started communities based on his 'Rule' - practical methods for the spiritual life.

Modern Western society 'post-virtue' (MacIntyre). Our need is not to shore up 'the imperium' but to develop communities which keep alive the moral life.

Need to embrace non-geographical exile and form vibrant counterculture.

### Chapter 2: The roots of the crisis

'Religion' from Latin word meaning 'binding together'.

5 key eras: Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, Industrial/political revolution, Sexual revolution

Replacement of accepted reality of the spiritual realm with new humanism; replacement of unquestioned authority of (often corrupt) church with individuals and bible; replacement of faith in revelation with Reason; emergence of democracy, capitalism and Marxism; emergence of psychological understanding of humanity based on the self and need for fulfilment.

1960's - old moral boundaries finally dissolved in search for authentic free self.

Response of churches - moral authority has been lost even for members - "nothing more than a loosely bound assembly of individuals committed to finding their own truth".

In the past - great suffering, but shared meaning. Today - great comfort, but no significance or connection.

### Chapter 3 - a Rule for living

Today's restored Benedictine monastery in Norcia (Nursia).

Community a "sign of contradiction to the modern world": obedience, stability, poverty, chastity set against atheism, fragmentation, disorientation, selfishness.

"Plain" life: cycle of prayer, work, eating, rest. Making space for God's grace. Drawn by love not legalism.

Aim to form resilience without hardening the heart.

Key principles:

Order in community and internally as act of resistance against disorder in the world. Regular simple acts produce humility.

Prayer - contemplation and adoration of God. Lectio divina. Western tendency just to feel and think. Prayer gets us out of ourselves.

Work. Manual labour, doing good works for others, using gifts. Glorify God.

Asceticism. Simple living, fasting, self discipline. Opposite to contemporary comfortable religion. Physical self denial assists spiritual growth. Trains for future suffering.

Stability. Commitment to staying in the same place - assists in going deep - opposite of liquid postmodernity

Community - learning how to love one another. Need for discipline.

Hospitality - openness to the world in the sense of welcoming outsiders while maintaining own boundaries.

How can this apply to those not in a monastery?

#### Chapter 4 - A new kind of Christian politics

Traditional party politics can't help us (eg conservatives voting Republican in US)

Need radical "hands-on localism" - look to Catholic dissidents defying communism in cold war Eastern Bloc - Vaclav Havel.

Trump a symbol of moral decline not solution to it. Association with Trump is damaging the reputation of conservative Christianity.

The best conservatives can hope for - continued windows of freedom to do evangelism and good works. Better to build thriving subcultures than make alliances with power.

Focussing on local community not withdrawal from the culture but attending to it.

Story of former politician going back to private law firm and giving time to developing local church.

Religious liberty is the most important thing to fight for centrally - means to end of continued mission.

Writings of Havel - politics for the persecuted minority.

Create 'parallel polis' existing alongside official order, but not pietist or closed - continued sacrificial witness to Christ in public square. Underground schools and theological colleges. Start locally from below - not following top down one size fits all programme.

#### Chapter 5 - A church for all seasons

"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 wish to evangelize".

Church needs to rediscover liturgical worship, asceticism, community, discipline, otherwise will be trying to evangelise with no saltiness.

Leave shallow contemporary evangelicalism and rediscover depths of the past.

Liturgy - the medium is the message. Sacraments - combining intellect and imagination. Worship not imitating pop culture but set apart from it.

Discipline - prayer meetings and certain services not optional. Mutual accountability. No hypocrisy e.g. toleration of divorce and remarriage but anti-gay.

Evangelise with beauty and goodness, not just words.

The church must embrace exile and be prepared for martyrdom. Bonhoeffer and Wurmbrandt.

#### Chapter 6: The idea of a Christian village

Home family and church family must take priority in terms of preserving and passing on the faith.

The home as a domestic monastery. Family prayers. Prioritising worship over social/sports events.

Hospitality. Purity - keeping evil influences out. Model and teach going against the flow.

Avoid excessive discipline and sheltering of children. Avoid controlling leadership in community.

Live close to other church members and do life with them (meals etc).

#### Chapter 7: Education as Christian formation

"Education has to be at the core of Christian survival". We have currently more freedom to establish Christian education than eastern Europe under communism.

Classical Christian schools.

Must abandon middle class view of secular education as passport to the professions and a comfortable life. Education must promote holistic Christian worldview.

But can't just tack chapel services and RE onto otherwise secular education model [like English public schools?] Needs to be based on biblical anthropology, where learning of knowledge not separated from learning virtue.

Today's young people are theologically illiterate even from evangelical backgrounds.  
Rapid corruption of culture - example of how many young people identify as trans or bi, and even some Christian parents seem OK with it, because they don't understand where it comes from.  
Content of curriculum in classical Christian school: Scripture. History of Western civilisation. Facts about the world (Maths/science). Reasoning and expression in writing and speaking. Abstract thinking, poetry and art.  
Homeschooling - sacrifice required.  
University - 'Christian study centre' based on L'Abri, linked to Christian students living together in community for accountability and mutual spiritual support.  
Education for faith and character - and what kind of jobs?

#### Chapter 8: Preparing for hard labour

Long established division and hierarchy between those who work with minds and with hands.  
Calling/vocation not just about full-time ministry, or secular career, but "a certain kind of life ordained and imposed on man by God for the common good" (William Perkins, Puritan, 1603).  
Meanwhile the workplace becoming more hostile to Christians: "it will be impossible in most [professions] to work without affirming sexual diversity dogma".  
Christian entrepreneurs needed - to create employment for those driven out of certain professions.  
Support Christian businesses.  
Rediscover the trades. [Get our children to be plumbers rather than debt-laden arts graduates?]  
Prepare to be poorer, more marginalised.

#### Chapter 9: Eros and the new Christian counterculture

'Heresy' of Christian teaching about sex the most important core doctrine to obey.  
Paradox - we need to learn about proper use of sexuality from monks.  
Refuse to try to reconcile repaganisation of sexual revolution with orthodox Christianity.  
Biblical teaching on sex, redirecting the erotic instinct, is central to proper anthropology and a powerful moral/social force - survival of Christianity depends on preserving it.  
Large sections of Western populations have changed their mind to support the sexual revolution including self-identifying Christians, who no longer believe in biblical authority (result: liberal churches shrinking rapidly).  
Most orthodox clergy too scared to talk about sex issues. Millennials focus on social justice instead.  
Key to teaching: not moralism, but affirming goodness of God's created order.  
Parents must be primary sex educators. Human videos really good.  
Support single people especially those with same sex attraction. Cut off pornography.

#### Chapter 10: Man and the Machine

Addiction to phones and social media shows technology controls us rather than "for relief of man's estate" (Bacon).  
BO communities will remain "apathetic" to the "liturgy" of technology, which is not morally neutral but shapes our thinking (eg valuing present experience over past wisdom).  
The Internet: "the floodgate of liquid modernity" - massively accelerates cultural change; reduces our attention span (rewires our brains).  
So: while use of technology necessary, need for regular "digital fasting" as way of de-toxing and enabling unhurried contemplation of Truth. Will help mental and spiritual health.  
Restrict children's access to internet and phones.  
Ban phones from church services! Being a disciple of Christ is about submitting to formation, not surfing information.  
Do manual tasks. Learn crafts. Develop relationships.  
Technology facilitates the worship of self - bigger danger than left wing politics or Islam?  
BO enables us to reclaim the real world.

#### Conclusion: The Benedict Decision

The church as Ark and Wellspring.  
Love, honed by spiritual disciplines and suffering, as the foundation.  
Don't start by trying to save the world, but by gathering a small group who want an ordered way of life around Christ. Go outside the collapsing culture and live in tents - but close enough to be able to rescue those looking for help.