

The Benedict Option: A Necessary Preface

by Jeffrey D. Breshears

In the course of reading reviews and listening to comments over the past couple of months regarding Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option*, it has occurred to me that some kind of Preface needs to precede any kind of thoughtful and focused discussion of the book. In particular, there are three basic questions that should be addressed in order to clearly understand Dreher's thesis and his seminal arguments. Unless there is a consensus agreement on these issues, any discussion and debate on the relative merits of the book are probably futile.

1. Is American culture getting progressively better or worse?

Since cultural deterioration is such a fundamental assumption of Dreher's book, this is an issue on which readers should be clear. For most traditional Christians, the question, "Is American culture getting progressively better or worse?" would appear to be a "no-brainer." The massive expansion of the welfare state over the past 50 years along with dramatic increases in crime, drug abuse, civil unrest and disrespect for authority, pornography, sex trafficking, abortion, divorce, the illegitimate birthrate, cohabitation, homosexuality, the pervasive promotion of moral decadence in mainstream entertainment, and declining standards in most every area of civic and cultural life should be sufficient to convince all but the most unobservant that America is in a perilous state. But in fact there is probably more disagreement about this, particularly among younger generation Christians, than one might imagine. This is due at least in part because most have been subjected to an almost constant barrage of propaganda via the media, the education systems and popular culture that depicts America as a racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, hegemonic, self-righteously puritanical and innately fascist nation devoid of "social justice." Therefore, it is imperative that any substantive study of *The Benedict Option* address this question at the outset.

Unfortunately, many older Americans have bought into the "Christian America" myth, which greatly complicates the issue. There is no question that in the past America was nominally a "Christian nation" with a firmly-entrenched quasi-Christian civil religion, and that these Christian influences checked at least some of our society's worst impulses. Now, however, most of these influences have been neutralized if not totally eliminated by a broad coalition of forces determined to "fundamentally transform America" – as Barack Obama put it. Yet many, including many professing Christians, would argue that the vast changes over the last 50 years have generally been for the better. Dreher is convinced otherwise. As R. C. Sproul notes in his book, *Lifetimes*, "I doubt if there has been a period in all of Christian history when so many Christians are so ineffectual in shaping the culture in which they live as is true right now in the United States."

2. Is there a "culture war" in America?

The idea of a "culture war" in America is very unsettling, as I wrote about in the article, "**The Culture War and the Two Americas – The Undeniable Realities**":

The idea of a culture war is not a popular topic, and anyone who raises the issue risks public ridicule and condemnation. Many Americans, including many Christian leaders, either minimize

its significance or even deny its existence. This is understandable because we would all like to think the best of others, including those with whom we disagree. We would like to believe that most Americans love this country and its traditions. As a matter of course, we often assume that most everyone shares essentially common values and a common vision for America although our methods and priorities may differ.

This ideal is particularly attractive to Christians because we naturally assume that it is more Christlike to function as a peacemaker than a culture warrior, or as a bridge-builder rather than a wall-builder. But the harsh reality is that not everyone shares a common value system, a common vision, or a common moral code. There are, unfortunately, two Americas whose values and goals are incompatible, and in such situations in which truth and morality are at stake, peacemaking is attainable neither through compromise nor capitulation. True peace is only achievable when aggressive evil is contained, and considering the pervasive nature of evil in our society, the failure to confront it is irresponsible and cowardly. As Christians, our moral responsibilities extend beyond merely ourselves, our own families, and perhaps our own church. We are members of a social community, and we simply cannot ignore the larger cultural issues swirling around us. When the culture is toxic, it pollutes everything (and everyone) in it.

From point of fact, the culture war is real whether we prefer to acknowledge it or not. Furthermore, it is nothing new. It was present at the outset of American history, and from the beginning there has been an ongoing struggle between those who envisioned America as a potential New Jerusalem versus those who wished to create a New Babylon....

In the booklet, *The Ministry of the Watchman*, I elaborated further on this theme:

Internationally, radical Islamic terrorism, economic instability in Europe, nuclear-armed regimes in Iran and North Korea, Chinese hegemony in Asia, and the revival of Russian aggression all portend danger. But the most alarming threats that America currently faces are

internal rather than external, moral rather than military, and spiritual rather than physical. And precisely because they germinate from within, these threats are significantly more insidious than at any other time in our history....

Prior to the 1960s the analogy of barbarians at the gates of American civilization would have served as an appropriate metaphor. For decades a motley assortment of anti-Christian forces had been gathering outside the city walls, pressing against the gates, clamoring for admission. At points along the wall that were left unguarded, some had managed to scale the wall or squeeze through fissures in the foundation. At other locations, some gained entry when sympathetic allies on the inside (including journalists, academicians, and even some clergy) opened doors along the perimeter of the wall for them. But for the most part they were held at bay. There was no grand assault until the cultural guardians within the city – some of the very people and institutions whom we counted on to protect us – began systematically unbolting and opening the gates. Whether motivated by naivete, power, greed, or a decidedly secularistic agenda, they set the stage for the culture war that has raged ever since....

Now for fifty years cultural barbarians have been methodically besieging one citadel after another, ransacking the city and generally wreaking havoc. For a civilization as immense and complex as America, it takes a while, even once the barbarians have gained entry, for the whole city to fall. There are countless skirmishes and continuous house-to-house street fighting, and sometimes they are temporarily beaten back. But much of the city has already been overrun....”

At the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in 2014, Princeton University professor of jurisprudence **Robert George** warned of the inevitable consequences of the culture war:

The days of socially acceptable Christianity are over.... It is no longer easy to be a faithful Christian [and] an authentic witness to the truths of the Gospel. A price is demanded and must be paid. There are costs of discipleship that are burdensome and painful to bear....

Powerful forces and currents in our society press us to be ashamed of the Gospel – ashamed of our faith’s teachings on the sanctity of human life, ashamed of our faith’s teachings on marriage as the conjugal union of husband and wife. These forces insist that the Church’s teachings are out of date, retrograde, insensitive, uncompassionate, illiberal, bigoted – even hateful. These currents... threaten us with consequences if we refuse to call what is good evil, and what is evil good. They command us to conform our thinking to their orthodoxy, or else say nothing at all....

To be a witness to the Gospel today is to make oneself a marked man or woman. It is to expose oneself to scorn and reproach. To unashamedly proclaim the Gospel in its fullness is to place in jeopardy one’s security, one’s personal aspirations and ambitions, the peace and tranquility one enjoys, one’s standing in polite society. One may in consequence of one’s public witness be discriminated against and denied educational opportunities and the prestigious credentials they may offer; one may lose valuable opportunities for employment and professional advancement; one may be excluded from worldly recognition and honors of various sorts; one’s witness may even cost one treasured friendships. It may produce familial discord and even alienation from family members. Yes, there are costs of discipleship – heavy costs....

There was a time, not so long ago, when things were quite different.... Biblical and natural law beliefs about morality were culturally normative; they were not challenges to cultural norms. But those days are gone. What was once normative is now regarded as heretical – the moral and cultural equivalent of treason. And so, here we are....

The days of comfortable and acceptable Christianity are over.... Will we seek to “fit in,” to be accepted, to live comfortably in the new Babylon?... One day we will give an account of all we have done and failed to do... before God – the God of truth, the Lord of history.... One thing alone will matter: Was I a faithful witness to the Gospel? Did I do everything in my power to place myself on the side of truth? The one whose only begotten Son tells us that he, and he alone, is “the way, the truth, and the life” will want to know...

whether we sought the truth with a pure and sincere heart, whether we sought to live by the truth authentically and with integrity, and... whether we stood up for the truth, speaking it out loud and in public, bearing the costs of discipleship that are inevitably imposed on faithful witnesses to truth by cultures that turn away from God and his law. Or were we ashamed of the Gospel? [<http://thecatholicbeat.sacredheartradio.com/2014/05/15/robert-george-am-i-ashamed-of-the-gospel/>]

Quoting again from my article, “**The Culture War and the Two Americas**”:

Many Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of a culture war. By nature, I can relate to that feeling. As Christians, we sincerely desire to live in peace with all people as much as possible, just as we earnestly aspire to be as tolerant and accepting of others as possible. Furthermore, there is an almost unavoidable spirit of self-righteous judgmentalism that accompanies the whole culture war concept that is exceedingly unappealing.

But idealism doesn’t alter reality, and the truth is that the culture war exists whether we prefer to acknowledge it or not. In fact, it is precisely because so many Christians have been so reluctant to recognize it and so fearful to engage it that we find ourselves in our current predicament. We are losing the culture war, and we are losing it decisively – not because the Christian faith has nothing to offer to modern man, but because we have essentially forfeited the war to our opponents. As a result, we see the consequences in a culture that is rapidly decaying and disintegrating all around us.

In *How To Win the Culture War*, Peter Kreeft, in the literary tradition of C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, constructs an imaginary lecture by Satan to a “captive audience” of demons in which he sets forth a master strategy for winning what he calls “the Great War” – the campaign to destroy Western civilization. Satan’s fourth principle is particularly relevant in the context of Dreher’s book:

A fourth principle of our success is to get them [i.e., Americans] to cover up the battlefield with peace banners, to deny the very existence of the

war they're in. This easily follows from the success of the third principle: the Big Lie of relativism. If your philosophy tells you that there are no real absolutes, then there can be no real war. If you reject the idea that there is any real evil worth fighting, and any real good worth fighting for, you reject the idea of fighting, the ideas of spiritual warfare itself. What a terrific advantage this gives us on the battlefield: most of our Enemy's troops don't even know it is a battlefield. [Peter Kreeft, *How To Win the Culture War* (2002), p. 73.]

American Christianity faces many challenges, but the greatest threats come from within our own society under the rubric of cultural liberalism. This ideology, whether we identify it as Secular Humanism, Neo-Marxism or Political Correctness, poses the greatest threat today to individual morality, civic virtue, social sanity, our public institutions, and virtually every aspect of American culture – including the church itself. As the Christian academic **Gene Edward Veith** has observed...

It is not just social conservatives who have a cultural agenda. The true agenda of the left is not so much economic or big-government as cultural. The goal of the left is the liberation of mankind from traditional institutions and codes of behavior, especially moral codes. It seeks a restoration of a state of nature, one of absolute individual liberty....

While many conservatives... focus on free-market economics and small government, they do not realize that hard-core leftists do not really care much about such things. Meanwhile, the social liberals march through the culture largely unopposed.... [Gene Edward Veith, "Cultural Agendas: The Left Isn't Motivated by Economic Policy." *World* (March 8/15, 2008), p. 35.]

In summary, as I wrote in "**The Culture War and the Two Americas**":

America's culture war is not an illusion, and those who refuse to acknowledge it are either spiritually and morally blind, egregiously apathetic, or too timid to engage it....

The issues at stake are not trivial. They are substantive and serious, and they reveal fundamental differences regarding our

understanding of truth, morality, and justice, as well as our view of what kind of society and culture America should be. Unfortunately, on matters such as these, there is relatively little room for compromise.

Turbulent times call for people of courage and conviction who understand the issues at stake and are willing to engage the fight. As Christians, we understand that underlying the culture war is a spiritual struggle between reality, truth, justice, morality, and civility on the one hand and utopian idealism, deceit, injustice, immorality, and incivility on the other. Furthermore, we know that the primary battle ground in this war is the human heart, and that what we see manifest in our society and culture today is merely the expression of a titanic struggle between good and evil that is being waged in the spiritual realm.

Naturally, we would like to see Americans put aside petty partisanship, transcend their ideological differences, and unite in the cause of justice, morality and civility for the sake of all. We would like to see the two Americas fuse into one. But unfortunately, this is unrealistic because the differences that divide us are not superficial or simply stylistic or primarily tactical. In substance, the division is between those who believe in absolute truth and universal moral laws versus those who think everything is relative and subjective. As radio talk show host **Dennis Prager** has noted, "America will be united only when one [of these worldviews] prevails over the other." Many cultural liberals seem to understand this, but many cultural conservatives – including many Christians – apparently do not.

3. Is true Christianity countercultural?

Is authentic biblical Christianity ever mainstream and conventional, or is it always innately radical and countercultural? In keeping with the theme of the old hymn, "This world is not my home / I'm just a-passin' through," the testimony of Scripture appears to be consistent and unambiguous on this point.

- **II Cor. 4:4** – "The god of this age [i.e., Satan] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ."

- **Gal. 1:3-4** – “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age...” “This present evil age” refers to the world system as it always has been and will continue to be until the coming of Christ’s kingdom on earth.
- **Eph. 2:1-2** – “As for you [who have been redeemed], you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.” “The ways of this world” refers to the dominant values, priorities, and the mindset of this world, as **Thomas Merton** observes in *The Wisdom of the Desert*:

Society... was regarded [by the Desert Fathers] as a shipwreck from which each single individual [person] had to swim for his life.... These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster. [Quoted in Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, p. 11]

Commenting on Merton’s observation, **Henri Nouwen** notes in the introduction to his contemplative classic, *The Way of the Heart*, that our society is no better:

Our society is not a community radiant with the love of Christ, but a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get entangled and lose our soul.” [Ibid.]
- **Romans 12:2** – “Do not conform any long to the pattern of this world [i.e., the values and ways of thinking of this world], but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
- **Acts 2:37ff** – “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’

“Peter replied, Repent and be baptized... in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.... And with many other words he warned them: ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’”
- **I Cor. 3:18-19** – “Do not deceive yourselves. If any one thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.”
- **James 1:27; 4:4** – “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

“[D]on’t you know that friendship with the world [i.e., the world system – its values, etc.] is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”
- **I John 2:15; 5:19** – “Do not love the world or anything in the world.”

“We know that we are the children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.”
- **Eph. 6:11-12** – “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”
- **John 18:36** – Jesus to Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world.”
- **John 15:18-19** – Jesus to his disciples: “If the world [system] hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”
- **John 16:33** – “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”
- **John 8:12** – [Jesus said,] ‘I am the light of the world.’”
- **Matt. 5:14** – [Jesus said to his followers,] “You are the light of the world.”
- **John 17:14** – [Jesus prayer for his disciples]: “I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.”

Where did we ever get the notion that true Christianity is mainstream and socially-acceptable? In large measure, this way of thinking is part of the Constantinian legacy as I noted in the article, “**A Contemplative Response to the Culture War**”:

What Christians need today is a new paradigm. We can argue the relative merits or demerits of the old nominally-Christian civil religion of the past, but the fact is it no longer exists. Historically, whenever the church has functioned authentically and effectively, it has always been outside the cultural mainstream. True Christianity has never been the status quo, nor has it ever acclimated itself to the seductive forces of wealth, greed, power, coercion and exploitation that are always dominant in mainstream culture.

Throughout history the true church has always been a countercultural and a prophetic church. But in our country many Christians have assumed, erroneously, that America was (or should be) a “Christian nation.” In fact, America never was a Christian nation in any real sense, just as there has never been a truly Christian nation in all of world history. But America has been uniquely *influenced* by Christian values, and it is the erosion of these values that is the principle cause of our present crisis.

Christianity hasn’t always been what we see around us today. I’m not referring to the familiar comparisons between the state-sponsored Christendom of the Middle Ages and the religious liberty and separation of church and state that has characterized America’s religious heritage, but to a more fundamental comparison between the countercultural Christian communities of the first 300 years and the established state church that was later sanctioned, patronized and subsidized by the Roman imperial government.

Christian historians have long recognized the Constantinian era of the 4th century as one of the great watershed periods in human history. In a matter of a single generation, mainstream Christianity was utterly transformed. Beginning in that crucial period, Christian theology and church life departed from the apostolic tradition and conformed to the needs and the standards of the Roman imperial state. It is this form of

Christianity – a religious institution preoccupied with cultural acceptance, social and political influence, and economic power – that many have assumed ever since to be normative Christianity.

Most Christians don’t realize it, but we are the heirs of this original accommodation and absorption.... But this is a compromised and acculturated form of Christianity in contrast to the early church which understood that authentic Christianity always exists in tension with the dominant values of its day. As a spiritual reality the true church, made up of those whose lives have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, hold beliefs, values, and priorities that are never compatible with the prevailing *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times).

These three concepts are the basis for most all of the challenges, responses and solutions that Dreher addresses in *The Benedict Option*:

- (1) American culture is rapidly degenerating into a new Dark Age marked by spiritual, moral, social, economic, and political chaos and collapse;
- (2) A culture war has been raging in America for decades, and the forces of secular humanism are winning (or have already won) decisively; and
- (3) True Christianity has always functioned as a countercultural presence and a witness in opposition to a decadent world system that celebrates narcissism, hedonism, consumerism and materialism.

In lieu of a firm grasp of these truths, many readers, including many reviewers and critics of *The Benedict Option*, will flounder about in a perpetual state of mystification. These are those who constantly complain, “Why can’t we all just be nice and get along!” These are also those who constantly cry, “Peace! Peace!” when in fact there is no peace.



Jefrey Breshears, Ph.D., is a former history professor and the president of The Areopagus, a Christian study center and education organization in Atlanta, Georgia.
JBreshears@TheAreopagus.org