

**Lutheran Reflections on *The Benedict Option*:
A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation by Rod Dreher**

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Rod Dreher is senior editor of [The American Conservative](#) magazine. He was an adult convert to Roman Catholicism but then became Eastern Orthodox in mid-life. He has authored other books, including *Crunchy Cons: The New Conservative Counterculture and its Return to Roots*, and leans more toward Agrarian paleo-conservatism rather than more interventionist Fox News neo-conservatism, like the journal he edits which was co-founded by Patrick Buchanan. Dreher is a layman in the Eastern Orthodox Church and is married with children. He is stepping out on a limb, to a certain extent, to attempt to learn from the past and make suggestions for the present and future out of concern for traditional Christianity in the western world.

Dreher's [book](#), along with a recent publication by [Anthony Esolen](#), have attracted attention from conservative Christian thinkers and theologians from across denominational lines. Some have noted that these men and others are trying to build upon the thinking of *The Naked Public Square* by the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus of *First Things* magazine (a former Lutheran who became Roman Catholic). These men and others are attempting to come to grips with the cultural and civil implications of the new era that the Church is entering, at least in the western world. While the matters of [homosexuality](#), [gender](#), and [marriage](#) are current areas of attack, they are by no means the only areas of concern.

It is generally recognized that we are entering what has been variously described as a "Post-Christian" era or a "Post-Constantinian" era for Christianity in the western countries of the globe. The protections, support, and public regard for Christianity that emerged with the Edict of Milan in 313 and what followed from that over centuries are now evaporating in culture, government, and in the moral and intellectual fabric of western culture. While many have been listening for the other shoe to drop to signal the arrival of massive persecution on a grand scale, it is more likely to emerge as "death by a thousand cuts" or something more piecemeal. The inroads [abortion](#), [euthanasia](#), support for homosexuality, transgenderism, rejection of religious freedom, and attacks on the tax status of religious entities are all indicators of some larger changes emerging below the surface. Dreher also provides some very helpful critique and suggestions in regard to the dangers and masked damage that modern technology poses for Christians and churches. Dreher's book is an attempt to help Christians cope based upon the history of St. Benedict of Nursia in a time when barbarian heretics overtook Rome. Dreher is not suggesting we all go off to start a monastery or enter into cult-like compound, but to engage in some practical and purposeful strategies to be a parallel culture within a hostile society.

Now as a Lutheran reading Dreher's book there are some things that stand out. More than once Dreher refers to the Lutheran Reformation as a "revolution" of Luther. Dreher doesn't make any real distinctions amongst the various Reformers. He doesn't understand that Luther was a conservative, catholic reformer as opposed to the radical reformation of the Anabaptists, and others. He isn't really familiar with Luther but only a common caricature. This isn't

surprising as Dreher is of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox background primarily. Dreher does mention Dietrich Bonhoeffer positively. Early on in the book Dreher also makes a critique of Occamist Nominalism, which is an entire discussion in and of itself. Here I would say that Dreher himself is somewhat out of step with his own Eastern Orthodoxy and still has a foot in Roman Catholicism. Dreher does, however, mention more than once in the book, that he is not suggesting that his plan is a substitute for the theology of one's confession of faith. Dreher is not writing to do our theology for us.

As other reviewers have pointed out, Dreher does good cultural and moral analysis in his book, but presents an idealized picture of Benedictine Monasticism. Of course, in the evangelical and catholic confession of *the Book of Concord*, Lutherans have some concerns with monasticism on various grounds. As the Confessions see monastic life, what was originally a voluntary association became a burden upon conscience beyond the confines of the Word of God. Those who did not have the personal gift of being single often suffered damage to their faith through the obligations of monastic life, as was also the case in regard to mandatorily single clergy. Dreher is not making that kind of a suggestion, thankfully. No doubt, this is something he understands having moved from Roman Catholicism to Eastern Orthodoxy. Now undoubtedly many good things came from monastic life in terms of scholarship, resources for the prayer life of the church, artistic works, and so forth but notably the Augsburg Confession observes:

They taught that vows were equal to Baptism; they taught that by this kind of life they merited forgiveness of sins and justification before God. 12] Yea, they added that the monastic life not only merited righteousness before God but even greater things, because it kept not only the precepts, but also the so-called "evangelical counsels." 13] Thus they made men believe that the profession of monasticism was far better than Baptism, and that the monastic life was more meritorious than that of magistrates, than the life of pastors, and such like, who serve their calling in accordance with God's commands, without any man-made services. 14] None of these things can be denied; for they appear in their own books.

Not only did monasticism lead to justification by human works, it also grossly led to a distortion of the biblical understanding of a Christian's various daily vocations in life where God has put them in relation to their neighbor in the world. It would be well to review what the Augustana and [Apology](#) as well as the Smalcald Articles say about the problematic aspects of monasticism. But herein is where Dreher can be helpful in our day to keep us in the tension between being "in the world but not of it." "Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training," is something we subscribe to. Dreher points the reader toward asceticism as "askesis" or "training" in self-denial to focus on the things of God. So long as such is not done for self-justification then we might regard such as "fine outward training" when interpreted in an evangelical way. And here is where a Lutheran is going to say, "I wish he was familiar with a Lutheran understanding of vocation."

In terms of area of practical consideration Dreher strongly commends Christians mutually supporting one another without attempting to dilute one's theological confession or engage in unionism. He's suggesting cooperation in the context of social interaction, mutual business

support, homeschooling, and other educational enterprises where proper. Dreher also points to the need to be shrewd in regard to matters of government, religious liberty, and free exercise of religion in the public square. He means for Christians to be prepared legally, financially, and in terms of options for education and work for income. The LCMS has wisely sought expertise from outside organizations like [The Becket Fund](#) and the [Alliance Defending Freedom](#) for our post-*Roe vs. Wade* and [post-Obergefell society](#). Various other [pro-marriage](#), [pro-life](#) and [civil liberties groups](#) are also active in defending religious liberty and the rest of the [Bill of Rights](#), which are important for Christian and non-Christian citizen alike. These realistic and very plausible observations in *The Benedict Option* are important for us all to consider to be “wise as serpents but innocent as doves” and good stewards of what is entrusted to us.

The subject of education takes up a good amount of space in *The Benedict Option*. Dreher commends the renewal of classical Christian education. Many confessional Lutherans have already been taking up this cause for some time. The [Consortium for Classical Lutheran Education](#) has been hard at work on this and the online venture of [Wittenberg Academy](#) provides a virtually global resource for the church. Dreher likewise strongly urges that where classical Christian education cannot be had reasonably or where there are families who cannot afford it, that homeschooling be done wherever possible, or in some combination. Dreher, along with others, have come to the conclusion that in most places the public schools are for the time being a lost cause to protect our children from the new morality (as others have pointed out, [a Gnostic morality](#)) but also to properly catechize children in a way that is not compartmentalized.

In terms of higher education, Dreher observes that Christians will need to reclaim their higher education institutions for theological orthodoxy and serious piety. In other places he suggests a theologically rigorous while personally supportive campus ministry program (though he doesn't use the term). The more full-time, and serious, the better. Dreher is quick to observe that just because a person goes to a Christian school or a school within one's own denomination, this does not guarantee any more likely result of theological orthodoxy amongst the faculty (not just the theology department or dean of chapel), or a more holy and edifying lifestyle on campus amongst the student population. Oversight visitation of church college campuses in these various moral and theological matters is due now just as seriously as we had done with our seminaries in days past. The examination of the theological faculties and chapel services are not the only aspects of campus that are matters of confession. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. As Dreher points out, when we are moved to start new faithful schools at various levels, Christians need to be prepared to bear crosses and not to make as much money yet also consider the needs of those Christians who are unable to pay as much. Dreher also emphasizes also that Christians need to give sacrificially so that those with expertise, training, and good professionalism are honored respectably. With these changes on the horizon, this also means that we need to find ways to bolster caring for church workers and other Christians who need help in retirement or disability as a diaconal manifestation of mercy.

Throughout the book Dreher commends strong catechesis in churches that is not compartmentalized to simply just be a “class” with minimalized expectations and detached

from the larger liturgical life of the church. While from a confessional Lutheran point of view there are issues with how Dreher speaks of sacramentalism and his theology of liturgy, his general call for returning to historic liturgical practices with solid theology behind it is laudable, all within the context of a solid life of prayer and notably, church discipline that is holding up Christian truth. The work of the [Concordia Catechetical Academy](#) and recent [resources](#) published by Concordia Publishing House can help in this regard. (But perhaps there will come a time when publishing and literature distribution may need to be done underground.) The challenge of the Church Growth Movement and its related spawn have urged confessional Lutherans to go back and study [their own liturgical theology](#) and hymnody. But there are many quarters of our synod where that is still unknown and barely tolerated. There are some quarters where catechesis is only a shadow of what it once was. May we remain faithful to those treasures and not seeking to import what is not of our heritage from either direction.

Additionally, opportunities and facilities for retreats to help sustain not only church workers or age-segregated groups but families and Christian singles in the faith amid the cultural onslaught could be something given a more deliberate and liturgical consideration among us. Perhaps congregations in more peaceful or restful and isolated places, Lutheran camps, campuses, campus ministries, or cottages or even urban apartment complexes could be organized not as “camps” for 1960s style [age-segregated religious recreation](#), but as serious spiritual retreats and places of continuing catechesis and training in the faith but with a Lutheran understanding of vocation and justification by grace alone undergirding it all. They could also serve as inexpensive hostels for faithful Lutherans traveling and so become something like a modern version of that mutual support and hospitality the early church knew in Acts 2. They can’t cost us thousands of dollars to make use of these things. Chaplains, deaconesses, and theological faculties could be engaged to help enrich, oversee, and strength such places and be a clearing house for materials to take home back into the battle. These, then, in turn can become mission outposts for the times of nihilistic darkness. We will need retreats, as the world we live in is surpassing the vision of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, as well as other dystopian authors who forecasted a Malthusian eugenics-driven, technocratic police state of globalist proportions... a beastly Tower of Babel 2.0.

Part of what Dreher is attempting to do with *The Benedict Option* is to learn from the experience of Christians past chapters of Christian history where there has been oppression and alienation from the culture or government. Dreher suggests cultivating “parallel structures” to that of the Post-Christian culture. Dreher points out how some attempted to do this under Communism in Poland. Dreher wants to limit the exposure of Christians and especially children to the corrosive effects of the hostile culture as well as provide practical resources for even ordinary aspects of life that may be taken away because of edicts of political correctness or outright hostility (Christians providing baked goods or arranging flowers without being forced to compromise their confession of the faith). In some instances, Christians already have some “parallel structures” to offer alternatives to organizations that have either watered down their Lutheran commitments or abandoned it altogether. Parallel structures or ending old weakened institutions in favor of newly constituted Gnesio-Lutheran institutions may be needed for education at various levels, finances, legal, insurance and retirement benefits,

hospitals, retirement investing, alternatives to compromised monetary systems, church resources, construction, resources for changing tax situations for our institutions and clergy, Fourth Amendment protections, multimedia for education, vacation spots, safer technology, etc. Maybe there is room here to strategize on providing alternatives for probably scenarios where Christians may lose their businesses or where our confession of faith could be compromised by continuing to use a traditional public service or business. Here there are some cautions in terms of [vocation from a Lutheran point of view](#), but at the same time Dreher wants us rightly to think of this in terms of the newly emerging context.

Dreher covers a lot of territory throughout *The Benedict Option*. One thing that I find notably absent from Dreher, at least in a direct reference, is a clear sense of or articulation of Christian [eschatology](#). It may be there, but it isn't evident to me. Perhaps pop American Christian views on eschatology have soured some on speaking in these terms. Perhaps some would take speaking of the End Times and bearing the cross in that context as defeatist. "Why fight or do all this since it's all going to burn?" someone could cynically conclude, however wrongly. Perhaps good old Millennialism or the red herring of Dispensationalism gave us a bad taste in our mouths to speak of eschatology but given the global movements in these religious and cultural/moral matters, one thinks of the saying of our Lord, "as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be when the Son of Man returns." In the days of Noah, the thoughts of man's heart were only evil all the time. Perhaps it is in politically correct utopianism that people will say "peace, peace" when the winnowing fork will be applied at the last. To be sure, we are not to be in the business of predicting the day or the hour but we are to note the change of seasons. Also absent from mention is the fact that [we are not on a level playing field](#) with [Lucifer and his demons](#) about mounting covert attack and even becoming more overt it would seem as wolves rarely feel the need to don sheep's clothing anymore. The epistles are rife with eschatology and encouragement to be watchful.

In Dreher's *The Benedict Option* (or BenOp, as its popularly abbreviated) the author primarily calls out to conservative Christian laymen to be strategic, thoughtful, and involved in preparing for the coming storm against the Church in the western world. "The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it" (Proverbs 27:12). We should not put our trust in princes and where authority steps outside its bounds, obey God rather than men. We would be wise in our various stations in life and collectively as congregations, educational institutions, church organizations, and synods to anticipate the coming changes and prepare wisely but in faith.

There will come a time to stand firm and confess and suffer even martyrdom, and there will be times to flee to the hills. And the Lord has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church. That is, hell will not be able to withstand its advance. At the same time, there is no promise that a denomination, a synod, or a particular congregation will abide unto the end. We are not the saviors of the church, only the Lord is the Savior and foundation of the Church. The church is founded upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Himself as the cornerstone.

Our call is to remain steadfast and wise in our God-given vocations, give an answer for the hope within us, and to be wise stewards of what is entrusted to us, discerning the seasons. We are to guard that which makes us Christians and which makes the Church, being stewards of the mysteries of God. The [marks of the Church](#), the rightly preached Word and the rightly administered sacraments are the life of the church. To support those marks we might consider Dreher's analysis and suggestions and benefit from them. For the discerning and catechized confessional Lutheran Dreher gives us some practical direction but our theology must ultimately drive what is done (if that's you, do read it). Will the culture come back around and the rain shower of the Gospel come back through the western world on a similar scale as before or will this be the situation we persevere in until the Last Day? That we do not know. We confess the truth along a lonely way in this world but it is also a well-worn path ahead of us. It is the lonely way... together, following in the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

But either way, it is wise to prayerfully consider these things and speak of these things with each other, richly engrossed in Scripture and [Confessions](#), receiving the gifts of God in the Divine Service. But one thing is clear, we cannot wait around with things on cruise control with the way we've approached things collectively since the 1980s. We cannot rest in nostalgia of "Garrison Keillor style church basement Lutheranism" or wait around for the next Barna Research book or and then uncritically implement whatever suggestions Barna offers to pander to the cultural trends and forget preaching repentance. We cannot go on [imitating the Neo-Evangelicals](#) or the [ELCA](#)'s gospel reductionism or simply avoid theology ostrich-style. It is time to repent of looking for a magic button. While it isn't perfect or complete, the BenOp is not a magic button. Some have written thoughtful critiques that warn of the weaknesses or blindspots in Dreher's advice. [Read those as well as you discern the times.](#) For us, however, it is time to be actively back in the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, learning from the saints who have gone before us, with our heads lifted up watchfully looking for the return of Christ while bearing our crosses through tribulation, surrounded by various forces in spiritual war, and worshiping before the throne of the Lamb who was slain and yet lives. I'm grateful to Rod Dreher for getting us thinking about some of these things.