

On March 2, 2017 Katelyn Beaty, editor at large at Christianity Today magazine, wrote an article for the Washington Post entitled “Christians have lost the culture wars. Should they withdraw from the mainstream?” In that article she spoke of how many conservative Christians seemed to have found a renewed hope about the election of President Donald Trump - in that he promised to address the needs and concerns of those in the Christian faith. But then she writes about the dark possibility that the crumbling of values and the decay of morality in our culture just may have gone far beyond the tipping point of no return, and that conservative Christians — traditional Orthodox, Catholic, and evangelical Protestants — may have to consider withdrawing from public life and pursue the “Benedict Option.”

The “Benedict Option” derives its name from a 6th-century monk who left the crumbling Roman Empire to form a separate community of prayer and worship. Benedict of Nursia founded monasteries and a well-known “Rule” to govern Christian life together. By many accounts, Benedictine monasteries seeded the growth of a new civilization to blossom throughout Western Europe after Rome’s fall. In writing of this, author Rod Dreher argues that conservation Christians today should likewise withdraw from the crumbling culture of North America to preserve the faith - lest it be choked out by secularism, individualism and activism. He argues that Christians today should be little “Benedicts” - investing in churches, schools, and institutions that will incubate their faith against a corrosive mainstream culture. In many ways, he says, the Benedict Option is simply a call for Christians to invest in the communities that sustain the historical faith of the church - in stark contrast to so many contemporary churches where attendees’ see the church as a mall and live out their faith like pep rally, where God exists to make us feel happy and good about ourselves. The Benedict Option, he says, calls todays’ Christians to personally root themselves in time-honored biblical theology and spiritual disciplines - such as prayer, fasting and confession rather than the moralistic faith of the therapeutic deism of our day.

But, Rod Dreher also writes, beyond this call for Christians to re-establish and protect biblical practices and institutions - the Benedict Option is also a call for Christians to be culture warriors who use stealth defense tactics to gain back the sacred ground that has been overtaken by the darkness of the evil one. He writes, “Don’t fight the culture war . . . with meaningless and needlessly inflammatory gestures . . . we can no longer rely on politicians and activists to fight the culture war on our behalf.” Instead, he says, we must pursue and build up within us a Christian faith “that can outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the occupation.” The Benedict Option, he states, is nothing if not embattled - and military metaphors are the best way for Christians to think of relating to our non-Christians neighbors.

We can clearly see that we are called to that battle by Jesus himself in Acts 1:8 when he told his disciples: *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* The key word here is “*witnesses*” - in that the Greek word in the New Testament that is translated as “*witness*” in English - is the same Greek word in the New Testament that is translated as “*martyr*” in English. A martyr is someone who dies for what they believe. A Christian martyr is someone who gives up their life because they believe in Jesus. To be a “*witness*” for Jesus Christ means to be someone who gives up their life because they believe in Jesus – and that belief in Jesus causes them to share the good news of what they have seen, heard, and experienced through the life-changing, heart-transforming, soul-restoring power of the risen Christ.”

This is also our call to follow Jesus: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”* (Mark 8:34). In Philippians 1:21 the apostle Paul wrote: *“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”* The Christian life of living for Jesus and sharing Jesus is a battleground not a playground. Jesus promised us that we followed him it would mean stepping into a warzone. Those who are truly following Jesus will first and foremost find themselves a spiritual battle that is constantly being waged in the unseen spiritual realm which will often manifest itself in our visible, physical realm.

The apostle Paul affirmed this in Ephesians 6:12 when he wrote: “*we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*” But while we are called to by our Lord Jesus to enter into the battle fight that battle on his behalf - he also promises to be with us and empower us to fight the good of faith when we are “*witnesses*” for him while we are still on earth: “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” The apostle Paul affirmed this also in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 where we read: “*though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.*” This is the power of the persistent witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ that we see in our text for today.

Last week, in Matthew 10:1-15, we saw twelve of Jesus’ disciples respond to his compassionate call for laborers to bring in the harvest of those who might respond to the good news of the gospel - that Jesus was the Messiah that God had promised to send to the people of Israel. After commissioning the twelve ordinary men to be his “*apostles*” Jesus shared the principles and instructions the apostles were to use in the gospel ministry they were to carry out. He told them the gospel ministry needed to be focused; it needed to be clear, it should reflect the work of Christ and it must be done by those who trust God with all of their hearts - and they should concentrate of those who respond and remove ourselves from those who do not listen. In our text for today Jesus warns his disciples/apostles and us about the dangers of the response of those who do not listen, and who aggressively rebel and reject the gospel of Jesus Christ.

*“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves,
so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” Matthew 10:16*

Up to now, as we’ve been walking through Matthew 10, Jesus has been telling his disciples to *go to the sheep – ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’* (Matthew 10:6) - because they “*were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*” (Matthew 9:36). But now Jesus tells his disciples that they themselves are to be the sheep: “*I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.*” Why the reversal? Well, there are two reasons. The first reason is - Jesus is now sending his disciples out as sheep is because the focus of their gospel ministry also has a secondary purpose. In the first part of Matthew 10 we read that Jesus delegated his authority and gave instructions to the disciples regarding sharing the gospel with nation of Israel, the original chosen people of God. But now, in our text for today, Jesus his apostles and disciples instructions about how they might fulfill the purpose of the Great Commission to “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations*” (Matthew 28:19) throughout the entire world after their ministry to “*the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*” Jesus had previously described the nation of Israel as sheep who needed shepherds (“*like sheep without a shepherd*” Matthew 9:36) so it would be expected that Jesus would tell the apostles Israel might receive them as shepherds among sheep. But now, in this new focus of his gospel ministry, Jesus tells them that he is sending them out “*as sheep in the midst of wolves.*”

This statement of warning is somewhat unnerving and also seems to somewhat unloving. Why would Jesus, the chief Shepherd, send out his sheep out to the wolves instead of protecting them? Well, here is where we see the second reason that Jesus is now sending his disciples sends out as sheep. Simply put, Jesus sending out his “*sheep in the midst of wolves*” is an appropriate graphic description of the rejection that they should expect to receive at the hands of the world - *while at the same time* describing the nature of the relationship they were to have with the chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Sheep are one of the most dependent and helpless of all domesticated animals, and sometimes they also show a keen lack of intelligence. A shepherd has quite a job in just keeping them alive and healthy, in addition to providing protection from predators. Sheep will eat poisonous plants. They are vulnerable to extreme weather, infections and disease - and so must be sheltered and checked regularly for cuts and disease symptoms. They are frightened by harmless things. Their only defense is running away, which they do not do well.

Disciples are often described as sheep in many passages in the Bible. That may not be flattering, but it is accurate. Our lives are desperately dependent upon the Good Shepherd. We quite often don't know enough to do what is right and we cannot protect ourselves. We rely on our Shepherd to lead us and protect us. If Jesus' disciples are to survive among the "wolves" of the world, we must rely upon Jesus. Those that would seek to destroy followers of Jesus Christ are often described in the Scriptures as "wolves." In Matthew 7:15 Jesus described as them as "*false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*" Paul speaks of this in Acts 20:29 when he warned the Ephesians elders: "*I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*"

Why does Jesus, the Good Shepherd, send his defenseless sheep out into this fallen, sinful world among the "wolves"? Because that is where he can best use his sheep in their service for him. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows what he is doing, and he knows the purpose he has for each one of his sheep – and in order for that purpose to come to fruition, his sheep will have to trust him as they go. In John 10:27-28 Jesus said: "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*" This promise does not mean the sheep will not be persecuted, tormented and even killed, but it does mean that someday Jesus will gather each one to himself in heaven and give to them eternal life. Followers of Jesus who are "sheep" will be subject to persecution, torment and martyrdom because the Good Shepherd himself - who is also the "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" - was persecuted, tormented and martyred by the world (John 1:29). The Scriptures are clear that those who truly live their lives for Jesus will be persecuted.

Jesus has already told us this when we went through the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:10-12: "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*" Paul also stated this in 2 Timothy 3:12-13: "*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse.*" In John 15:18-21 Jesus declared: "*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.*"

Jesus warned his apostles about the serious opposition they would face in sharing the gospel to a world that is opposed to God. They will be sheep among wolves. Jesus warning here is specific to the apostles here, but his warning also has implications that apply to us - since this principle is repeated in so many other places in God's Word as a general truth to all followers of Jesus Christ. Yet, this truth is very seldom included when people are told the gospel, and it is very seldom mentioned from the pulpits in churches today. Why? Well, generally, people just do not want to hear it. They would much rather hear about health and wealth and prosperity and healing and happiness. The apostle Paul told us this would happen in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 when he wrote that, "*the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.*" Sin and suffering are not popular topics, but they are the reality of life and they are reality of our faith in Jesus Christ. People pursue happiness because it fits their personal desires, but the joy of following Jesus Christ begins with the humility of turning from personal desire to submitting to God. Being transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ involves being convicted of our sinfulness and its condemnation and finding forgiveness in God's grace, as faith is placed in the person and work of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And that joy continues as self-will is yielded to God's will - as we, in Paul's words from Philippians 3:10, come to "*know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.*"

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

And so what should be our attitude be towards being sent in the midst of wolves? We are to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” In Jesus’ day serpents were a symbol of wisdom. They were considered crafty, smart, cunning and cautious animals. The idea of being “innocent as doves” speaks of being pure and true to God’s word and God’s will. The two combined together give us the idea of being wise with a sanctified sense of saying the right thing at the right time and place - and discovering the best means to achieve the highest goal. This is a characteristic that is to be developed by every Christian. We see this in Colossians 4:5 which us we should” *“Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.”*

To “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” means we are to be uncompromising in proclaiming the truth of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ - but that does not mean being abrasive, inconsiderate, belligerent, hostile, or rude. It means we are to be wise and innocent, cunning and gentle, perceptive and pure. That will be difficult at times – especially so in a day when God has been removed from the public square and our culture is now aggressively opposed to anything that has do with Jesus. But these very same things were happening in Jesus’ day. The apostle Paul was as uncompromising as anyone when it came to the Scriptures, yet he knew how to talk with people about the gospel without unnecessary offense to Jews or Greeks, weak or strong, slave or free. Paul said: *“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. . . To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings”* (1 Corinthians 9:19; 22-23). We are to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” - even when people reject us or persecute us. From here Jesus goes on to warn his apostles and warn us about the areas of life where wolves will attack us.

“Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues” (Matthew 10:17). The first area of life where wolves will attack the “sheep” of God who share the gospel of Jesus Christ is *religion*. The practical personal warning here would be to say: “Beware of those who are religious.” Religions persecute Christians because of the *competition*. They have no tolerance for a competing faith that claims to be the only way to God. The judgement and punishment of that would have looked somewhat different for Jesus and his apostles than is does for us today. The “courts” spoken of here would have been the Jewish religious courts, who, even under Rome, were allowed to settle most disputes among themselves including civil issues. The synagogue was not only the gathering place for worship, it was often also the court room. A Jew accused of breaking the Mosaic law or a rabbinic tradition would be brought before judges who would decide the case, determine the sentence and deliver the punishment. The common practice was that one judge would call out the sentence and another judge would announce the punishment. A court official would then do the scourging while others would call out the blows. The scourging itself was done with a thick stick that had leather thongs attached to the end. Some would also have bits of metal or rocks tied to the end of the leather thongs. The apostle Paul was scourged five different times because he taught Jesus was the only way to God.

Now of course those of us who truly know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, know that our faith in Jesus Christ is not a religion but a relationship. But because societies have seen fit to categorize Christianity as religion, we must be aware that *religious wolves* do infiltrate themselves into the church, posing as born-again Christians, who then acquaint themselves to people who *“will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”* Some of the religions that oppose us today are not based on faith in the risen Jesus Christ but rather on their faith in entitlement, politics, health, wealth, prosperity, psychology, self-esteem, victimization, rights, secularism and activism – along with all kinds of abstract truths and myths recognized by the society and culture we live in. Because we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are called to be so dramatically different from all of these – we will face opposition and persecution, in numerous ways, on different levels, to various degrees. Disciples of Jesus Christ will experience persecution from wolves in the church and from religious organizations.

“And you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matthew:10:18-20). Jesus continues his warning here of the wolves we will face in sharing and living out the gospel, by cautioning his apostles and us about *the wolves we will face in the governments* of the world. In the Bible we read of Herod Agrippa and other governmental leaders in the New Testament who were certainly such wolves. The apostles experienced the specifics of this warning, but this is also a general principle that applies to us today. While religions persecute Christians because they have no tolerance for a competing faith that claims to be the only way to God - persecution occurs by governments because *the world hates Jesus*. Dictatorial authoritarian countries hate Christ because he shifts allegiance from the state to himself. This is why atheistic communism has murdered millions of Christians. Others leading governments focus their politics and policies on pleasing certain people group – so that anyone or anything that displeases that group is opposed and removed as an obstacle for the public good. That is how persecution can exist to varying degrees in democracies - including those that are supposed to guarantee freedom of religion. 30 years ago, John MacArthur wrote, *“When its citizens turn away from the Lord and His standard, even the freest and most democratic governments, . . . will eventually inhibit the free expression and practice of the Christian faith in hostility to Christ and His Word.”* Disciples of Jesus will experience persecution from wolves in the governments of the world.

“Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death” (Matthew 10:21). It is one thing to suffer at the hands of wolves in an unjust government or a false religion, it is another to have the persecution arise from wolves within *our own family* - yet there is *danger of wolves* even from among those who are related by blood. Jesus states here that faithful witnesses will meet opposition from the members of their own families. Brother will betray brother, and children will have their parents put to death. This betrayal occurred within Jesus' own family who tried to take him away saying he had lost his mind. The truth is, a person lost without Jesus can have a greater loyalty to something or someone more than he or she does to those in their family. There is no hate like hate within a family. Today, Muslim converts experience this – it's also the same with Catholic converts and Jewish converts. In many communistic, totalitarian and Islamic countries in the world today the threat of death is real. The greater truth for us in all of this - is that when we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we become eternal members of the greater, more glorious family of God. And because it is so, disciples of Jesus Christ will experience persecution from wolves in their family.

“And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt 10:22). Here Jesus tells us that while we must beware of wolves in religion, in government, in our families – we also must *beware of wolves in society in general*. This does *not mean* that *every person* will hate us, but that *all people in general* will hate us. There are people from every nationality, every social class, and every walk of life that will hate God - and also hate anyone who speaks of or represents God through Jesus Christ. They hate Jesus because the nature, authority, and position of Jesus is so contrary to those of the world – and when pressed, they rebel rather than submit. The reality of all of this is that the over-whelming majority of people in the world will hate and rebel against God – and disciples of Jesus Christ are most often the recipients of that hatred and rebellion. But about this, Jesus said: *“But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”* This is the radiance of the glory of Jesus Christ we can know that is behind the dark clouds of difficulty - because the Good Shepherd is with us in the midst of the wolves, the outcome is sure! Disciples of Jesus will face persecution from wolves in all of society.

“When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matthew 10:23). In the face of dealing with wolves in the church, and from religious organizations and the government and families and from all of society, Jesus tells his apostles and us that our best defense against persecution and the hope in overcoming it - is to “flee.” Just as we are not to provoke animosity, we do not have to stay in the midst of persecution.

Basically, we will not receive any extra jewels in our crowns for being stubborn. The Apostle Paul gives us a good example of the balance. We do not find him trying to purposely stir things up as he went from city to city. Instead, as he preached the gospel, some people responded in faith and others got stirred up in opposition, resulting in persecution - which he would endure until it significantly hindered his work and then he would go to the next town. Even so, he was beaten, scourged and even stoned and left for dead. Paul did not seek persecution out, but when it came, he neither fearfully shrank from it nor did he stay after it had arisen, and neither should we. When I was in the military I came to understand that the word “retreat” in the armed forces does not mean you are defeated - but rather that you are no longer in a position to defeat the enemy, and so you back off and seek to find a better position to do so. In the midst of spiritual war Jesus calls us to do the same. When we find ourselves losing ground in our battle with wolves, we are to retreat and position ourselves back with Jesus. He is our better position of power.

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (Matthew 10:24-25). In these words, Jesus is summarizing what he just said concerning the rejection and persecution disciples of Jesus can expect from wolves. The impact of these statements is not one most of us would want to accept. This is the same truth for those of us in full time vocational ministry that has held back many from serving Jesus. Jesus is reminding us of our place as his servants. A servant or disciple of Jesus should not expect to be treated any better than Jesus. If our identity and our lives are intimately and intricately linked to Jesus, we will be treated as Jesus was treated. We should expect struggle, suffering and persecution – and we should rejoice when it comes. In Acts 5:40-42 we read that the Jewish religious leaders *“called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.”* This is the power of the persistent witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ that followers of Jesus Christ are called to live out.

“So, have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops” (Matthew 10:26–27). We need not fear the wolves in the fallen, sinful world we live in because someday our Lord Jesus will reveal the secrets of men’s hearts and expose them all. Romans 2:16 tells us *“God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.”* Our calling, our task, is not to please people - but to proclaim the gospel of the life-changing, heart-transforming, soul-restoring power of the risen Jesus Christ. The present judgment of those on earth should not frighten us, because we are living in the light of the future judgment of God. Despite being misunderstood, misrepresented, vilified, slandered, and abused, we must remain steadfast. We must not cease from our labor because our motives are mistaken, and our character is fiercely assailed. Our courage and hope is that one day all be set right again by God.

“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). In the midst of struggling with “wolves” we must keep in mind God has the last word. In the world’s thinking, killing the body is the most horrible prospect, yet God says it must not be the ultimate reason for fear. Opponents of the gospel may put to death the messengers of Jesus, but they are unable to separate them from the true source of life. Only God can destroy the soul. If there is to be fear, let it be of God! In the words of Martin Luther: “Let goods and kindred go, This mortal life also; The body they may kill: God’s truth abideth still; His kingdom is forever.”

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29-31). It didn’t cost much to purchase sparrows in the market. Yet God knows when a sparrow falls to the ground – because God is there! If God cares for sparrows in such a way, will He not also care for His own who are serving Him? We are of much greater value than many sparrows.

Jesus' point here is that the God the Father knows of our suffering for the gospel because He allowed it. And so, we should not fear *because* God is totally in control of our suffering, down to minute details of our lives. We read that "*even the hairs of your head are all numbered.*" Because God places such value on us, we need not fear personal threats or difficult trials that enter our lives for the cause of Jesus Christ.

"*So, everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven*" (Matthew 10:32-33). One of the reasons people use *for not sharing the gospel* of Jesus Christ with others - is that their faith in Christ is personal and private. In these last two verses Jesus kicks the legs out from under that excuse in telling us while our faith may be personal - *it certainly is not private*. In these words, Jesus is telling us that we must not only believe in Christ - we must also *profess our faith* in Christ "*before men*" – to others. In using the word "*Everyone*" Jesus was indicating that his statement was applicable to *everyone of us* - not just for the apostles Jesus was talking to. The word "*So*" attaches the promise which follows to the immediately preceding thoughts of watchful, fatherly care - extending like a great invisible hand over the true disciple. Since God is aware and can protect, there is no excuse for not sharing the gospel. The words "*acknowledges me*" literally means to "*confess in me*" - carrying the idea of confessing Christ out of a *oneness* with Him. It implies an identification and union of the confessor with the one confessed. To *confess in Christ*, we must be in Christ or already a believer. What this means is that the confession before "*men*" is much more than talking to people about Jesus. It is also a statement made about how one lives their life. The walk and talk go together in order to make the good confession. Jesus tells us that true disciples of Jesus see their faith in Jesus as being personal and unabashedly public. "*So, everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.*" Jesus' words here are plain enough. The grammar and context indicate Jesus was talking about Christians who fear people more than God, and so they don't talk about Jesus in order to gain favor with people, or at least to avoid the disfavor of people. Oh, may we love Jesus and people enough to confess our faith in Jesus!

All Christians should consider the Benedict Option's vision of loving and serving flesh-and-blood people in their communities, through acts of charity and hospitality. But we must not do so at the expense of removing ourselves from the public arena of the fallen world we live in. The popular slogan decrying that Christians are "to be in, but not of the world" is not in the Bible. There are biblical admonitions that we are "not to be of the world" by "loving the world" – but the issue of "in the world" is often defined so narrowly that it has become to mean "creating a *holy huddle* "in the world" to protect Christians from being influenced by the world. The reality is, we are all influenced by the world. Our ability to protect ourselves from that is not about whether we are "in" or "of" – but rather about the depth of our walk with God and about our accountability to one another. We *are called* "not to be of the world" by "loving the world" – but we have also been *sent into the world* by Jesus to live out his gospel. When talking about Christian life in our modern dark age, Rod Dreher – the proposer of the Benedict Option - uses the image of the Ark in the book of Genesis. The Ark is where the righteous survived as the whole world was destroyed in a great flood – and Christians today may need to build some Arks to help preserve the Christian faith in a culture that easily washes it away. But the difference between now and the days of Noah is God's promise to never again let a great flood destroy all of life. Christians living in post-Christian nations could withdraw to their Arks, waiting for their neighbors and cultures to be destroyed in a flood of moral chaos. But if they believe God's promises in God's Word, then they'll get busy building communities that throw their neighbors a life-line of Jesus amidst the coming tide.

In Act 26:16 the apostle Paul wrote that when Jesus appeared to him Jesus said to him: "*Rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.*" By the power of the persistent witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ - I pray that we would hear that same call to be witnesses for Jesus together as we seek to passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people! Amen!

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So, death is at work in us, but life in you. 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:12

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:31-39

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Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church