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When the Benedict Option is the Only Option

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Much has been written about Rod Dreher's *Benedict Option*. It has been portrayed as not so much an option as an opting out. Critics have said it is a call to run away from the public square, an escape, an indefensible retreat, and an admission of defeat. The Benedict Option is thought to be a flight into the desert—not so much to pray as to put one's head in the sand.

It has struck me in recent days, however, that the Benedict Option may be the only option. It may be the only option not because the surrounding culture is decadent and we want to protect our children. It is not the only option because we are fed up with the technological, fast-paced, shallow existence of

twenty-first-century life. It is not the only option because we are disgusted by porn, shocked by war, and spooked by gender confused radicals who are on the warpath. It is not the only option because we think the worldlings are worldly beyond redemption.

It is the only option because it is the only option.

What I am digging at was revealed to me with a re-reading of *Perelandra*—the second book in C.S. Lewis' space trilogy. Readers may remember that Professor Ransom has been transported to the planet Venus, which is still reveling in Edenic innocence. Ransom not only encounters the Eve of Venus, but Venus' serpent in the form of the scientist Weston.

In their first conversation, Weston spouts a progressive Teilhard de Chardin-type, secular-spiritual mumbo-jumbo. It all sounds lofty and plausible and highly intellectual. When Ransom punctures Weston's pomposity with the pin of common sense and the razor of philosophical steel, the scientist responds with condescending arrogance before changing the subject.

As Weston descends first into madness, and then into demonic possession, his temptation of the lady becomes ever more subtle and emotive. He plays on her vanity. He seduces her to disobedience with the high drama that she would be a brave pioneer, taking hold of her own freedom in order to achieve full maturity. Most of all he wears her down with endless discussion and dialogue. He never rests until he gets

her to give in. He bats away Ransom's objections with non sequiturs, mockery, ad hominem attacks and outright lies.

Ransom expresses his frustration at the fact that the Devil can fight dirty, but that he can't. He also observes that the demon-possessed creature "used plenty of subtlety and intelligence when talking to the Lady, but... that it regarded intelligence simply and solely as a weapon, which it had no more wish to employ in its off duty hours than a soldier has to do bayonet practice when he is on leave. Thought was for it a device necessary to certain ends, but thought in itself did not interest it."

I have found the same to be increasingly true in any discussion not only with progressives, but with an increasing number of ordinary folks. The discussion may concern politics, religion, sexuality, economics, or cultural matters. If there is a disagreement, there is very little logical thought or rational debate. The two weapons of emotivism and utilitarianism usually rule the day. No true debate takes place. Instead, arguments are dismissed by changing the subject, launching a personal attack or playing the victim.

A position is advocated according to sentimental feelings or practical considerations. The more intellectual, like Lewis' demon-possessed Weston, use intellectual arguments not as a process to discover the truth, but as a weapon—and a weapon that is more like a bludgeon than a rapier. If their intellectual argument falls flat, they simply deny, lie, and shout more loudly.

In other words, the Benedict Option may be the only option because debate has ended. Our society is so worm-eaten with relativism that any idea that one might use reason, research and debate to discover truth is defunct. The idea, not only that truth can be discovered, but that once discovered one has a duty to believe and obey, is even more obsolete. Consequently, if there is no truth there can be no reasoning into truth, and if there is no reasoning then there is no reason to argue. All is relegated to a matter of opinion—and often the opinion is not even offered as being true. The person asserts it simply because they believe it and they believe it because they assert it.

“You say pot-A-to and I say po-TAH-to... So let’s call the whole thing off.”

Thus the silence of the monks. They are silent not only in order to listen to God more acutely, but also because all the words are falling on deaf ears. If humanity is deaf there is no need for words.

The Benedict Option is therefore more about a change of heart and mind than growing a beard, getting some chickens, and building a utopian religious community in the woods. The Benedict Option means coming to the realization that the time for dialogue and debate is over and the time for quiet action has begun.

I am convinced that this is the true reason why Benedict headed for the hills in the sixth century. The dialogue was

pointless. The debate was a dead-end. So Benedict did what he could with what he had where he was.

Likewise the conservative Christian option today is to step back from the endless dialogue and debate and to focus on being consistent and authentically conservative. Within our families, our parishes, our schools and our workplace we will be committed to a way of obedience, stability and conversion of life, and our method will use the timeless tools of work, study and prayer.

Editor's note: This column first appeared May 5, 2017 on the [Imaginative Conservative](#) website and is reprinted with permission. Pictured above is Saint Benedict painted by Hans Memling in 1487.