

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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SMALL BEGINNINGS

by Gary North

**For who hath despised the day of small things?
(Zech. 4:10a).**

One of the most difficult things to imagine is a modern proponent of political liberalism standing up to pass the hat for some local social action project. What he will attempt to do is to create a grass-roots pressure group to promote the financing of the particular project with local taxpayer funds, or better yet, through Federal grants. The political liberal's idea of social action is action to increase the power of the State over local affairs.

The political liberal wants to achieve his goals through political action. His religion is the religion of politics. He is skilled at gaining favors by the State for pet projects. His answers for almost every problem are political: pass a law, enforce a law, get a grant. He enjoys politics. He sees politics as the central activity of a civilization. The State is the central institution.

The political conservative tends to regard politics as simply one activity among many, and the State as one institution among many. His interest in politics is diluted, unless he is a professional whose calling is politics. The strength of the conservative movement lies outside of politics, unlike the strength of political liberalism.

When something needs to be done, the conservative tends to ask himself, "How can it be done at a profit?" A second question is: "How can it be done on a tax-deductible basis?" The third question used to be: "Can it be done locally?" The fact that the third question is not usually asked by conservatives today indicates the extent to which conservatism has been influenced by the reigning political errors of the day.

This leads me to the topic of this essay, namely, the advantages and weaknesses of the non-statist approach to social problems. If we reject the premise of the statist, then we should have confidence in non-statist approaches to problems. But to overcome the statist ideology of our age, we have to be confident in our ability to succeed without appealing to the State.

Running Lean

Herbert Titus teaches law at CBN University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. This is Pat Robertson's school: Christian, conservative, and privately supported. In the Vietnam war period, Titus was a radical professor at the University of Oregon. He used to help students obtain draft deferments, as well as oppose the war in other ways. He noticed only years later that almost nobody ever offered to pay him for his assistance. It was assumed by radical students that such assistance was a free good, that it was somehow owed to the beneficiary. This is the typical mind-set of the political liberal.

The same phenomenon affects the bulk of the socialist-interventionist movements of our time. With the notable exception of the Communists, the Left has been generally unwilling to self-finance their programs in this century. They much pre-

fer to get the State to finance them. This has been done, too; the conservative rallying cry, "De-fund the Left," is valid. Ideologically radical organizations have for years been granted millions and even billions of dollars, from Planned Parenthood to the Legal Services Corporation.

But at some point, this dependence on the State backfires. Sources of private funding dry up, since everyone knows that the State is writing the checks. For instance, the Left has not developed successful direct-mail campaigns or mailing lists, unlike the conservatives. When public opinion finally turns against the religion of secular humanism, and voters start cutting off the funds, these organizations will lose access to perpetual funding. When the fiat monetary unit finally goes the way of all flesh, what will they use to pay their employees? The government supplies the money, but the money it supplies is Federal money. What happens if Federal money becomes worthless?

Non-statist movements start small and poor. They are decentralized. They must compete for the financial support of a limited number of donors. Most donors are on several mailing lists, and many ideologically conservative groups appeal to them for funding. They have to pick and choose among a large number of ideologically compatible organizations.

This competition tends to keep the conservative and religious groups lean. They cannot afford much waste. If they get fat, a downturn in the economy can cause a crisis. Thus, these groups learn to survive in a competitive market. This trains them in the realities of communication; if they have no message, no packaging, no mailing list, and no distinctive program, they are unlikely to survive, let alone prosper. This keeps them sharp. It keeps them relevant.

There is a price to pay for these benefits: **uncertainty**. Nothing is guaranteed. There is always the threat of disaster looming ahead. The fund appeals may take on a tone of desperation, of continual crisis. People who give money in response to such appeals, and only such appeals, are not the kind of people who make effective long-term associates or backers. The organization which attracts and keeps such donors is hard-pressed ever to admit success. If it does, it risks lower income.

Small religious and conservative organizations are for years confined to a state of total dependence on voluntary contributions. They struggle just to stay alive. They come and go. They frequently do not survive the death of the founders. But they leave behind a **legacy of dissent**, and this legacy eventually makes itself felt when the bankruptcy of the existing establishment becomes obvious, when the State can no longer supply the vote-getting special privileges and funds.

The despair which sets in after years of frustrating losses is natural. It must be resisted. **Frustration is basic to reconstruction**. The seeming imperviousness of the existing social and political order is overwhelming at times. But Gandhi's experi-

ence in India should remind us that a lifetime of seeming futility was rewarded with success, at least in the sense that Gandhi achieved his stated political goal, namely, independence from Britain. He ran very lean. Actually, he walked very lean. His march to the sea, his two fasts almost unto death, and his other public relations coups made him a formidable opponent of the entrenched ruling class.

Voluntarism

The strength of the non-statist groups, above all, is the commitment of their supporters to the cause. These people are willing to take their hard-earned and highly taxed money, and send it to a ministry they approve of. This is not characteristic of their opposition. They have **real reserves** — reserves of dedication, commitment, and the habit of regular financial sacrifice. The supporters are willing to take a stand. More than this: they are willing to finance a stand.

These groups stay small. They get their message out "by hook or crook," but seldom with support from the established intellectual and religious opinion-makers. But the real opinion-makers are not those who are most visible at the end of a civilization. They are the people in who are hidden in the historical shadows, working patiently until the day comes when a cultural crisis creates demand for new opinions.

Look at any urban public (government) school. It is bigger than any Christian school you have ever seen. A typical public high school has more students than all the Christian high schools in the county. But these schools, for all their bricks and mortar and football teams, are dying. Those inside are getting substandard educations. Yet it is tax-supported education, above all, which is the center of hopes, dreams, and schemes of the priests of humanism. **The public school is humanism's established church, and its influence is fading fast.** State boards of education are literally panicking at the threat offered to them by home schools and small Christian schools. They have good reason to panic. In a century, tax-supported education may well be a relic of the past, swept away by the forces of voluntarism. What will the broken bricks and loosened mortar be worth then?

Defenders of the principle of voluntarism are going through a kind of wilderness experience today. This is the cost of abandoning the fleshpots of Egypt. No more leeks, onions, garlic, and Federal hand-outs. Perhaps no more tax exemption, as the warfare escalates. Perhaps even a bit of persecution. But the early church received no tax exemptions. Luther did not train future Lutheran ministers by means of vouchers for seminary education issued by the Vatican, either. The lack of such support slows down the development of a movement in its early stages, when it is learning to cope with the realities of life, but sparse beginnings enable it to deal with growth and success later on, when its principles become more widely accepted.

Grass-Roots Organizations

"Organizations": The word is plural, not singular. The idea of establishing a single grass-roots organization is preposterous. It would be mowed down by the wide-blade power mowers of the opposition as soon as its sprouts were detected. Multiple organizations, on the other hand, can affect changes in many places, especially out of the way places where the opposition does not have its wide-blade mowers available.

Men try out different types of grass in different environments. In one place it may be Bermuda grass (or Bahamas grass, or even Switzerland grass). In others it may be plain old crab grass. What it must not be is unwatered, unfertilized grass that will wither when the mid-day sun hits it. That is the grass which humanists have planted, and as the State's restraints on freedom squeeze productivity out of the legal, visible markets, the end of cheap Federal fertilizers and cheap water will lead to a change in ownership of the field.

What we have is exactly what we need: **alternative grass seeds**, hidden from view in minor and seemingly insignificant fields. We are steadily raising up new, non-hybrid seeds that will survive the competition of new blights and new environments. The hybrid seed used by the State produces a lush lawn, but only under limited environmental conditions and only by continually returning to the monopolistic hybrid-seed sellers. It is not a resilient variety of grass.

Grass-roots organizations are all around us. Not one; many. They may co-operate with others for limited ends, but they have their own timetables, resources, and goals. They are competitive. Not all will survive; some will. Those that do survive will replace the existing structures of society, all over the world. Humanism is a worldwide phenomenon; it will collapse as a worldwide phenomenon, to be replaced by numerous alternatives.

Conclusion

The apparent ineffectiveness of small, underfunded ideological or religious organizations is deceptive. All long-term social change comes from the successful efforts of one or another struggling organization to capture the minds of a hard core of future leaders, as well as the respect of a wider population. There is no other way to change a society. The hope of stepping into power overnight is naive, let alone the hope of getting financial support from the existing leadership.

The Hebrews of Joshua's generation wandered in the wilderness for 40 years until their parents died. They had to prepare themselves mentally and organizationally for the battle to come. They certainly did not bother to court the favor of the king of Jericho, nor did they worry too much that the Levites had not graduated from fully accredited Baal Theological Seminary. If we only recognized our wilderness condition for what it is, we might not continue to make the mistakes in strategy that the Hebrews of Joshua's day didn't make.