

# Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

© Institute for Christian Economics, 1979

Vol. III, No. 5

Sept. /Ott., 1979

## THE "LITTLE THINGS" OF LIFE

by Gary North

Western civilization is the historical product of Christianity. Without Christianity, the development of the West would have been radically different. Of course, secular humanism and various intermediary philosophies have contributed greatly to the growth and shape of Western institutions since about 1660, but without the impact of Christian thought and culture, the foundations of Western secular humanism would not have been laid. It is impossible to think of Western culture without considering the historical impact of Christianity.

Most Protestants understand this fact. Yet at the same time, they have a tendency to denigrate the cultural accomplishments of the Roman Catholic Church in the medieval era. It is as if Protestants think that Western culture sprang up overnight in response to Luther's nailing of the 95 theses on the wall. But when we consider the savagery that faced the Irish missionaries in the sixth and seventh centuries, we all should become aware of the vast impact pre-Reformation Christianity had on Europe. In fact, without that impact, there would never have been a Europe. There would have been nothing more than pagan, fragmented tribes of primitive savages, with only an occasional raid from the Norsemen to bring "advanced" pagan culture into their lives.

There is little reason to believe that the level of formal Christian education was very great in pre-Reformation times. Without literacy and the printing press, written European culture was the possession of a tiny elite. What literacy that did exist prior to the eleventh century did so primarily in the monasteries, especially in Ireland. The knowledge of Christ and His work was overwhelmingly verbal, ritualistic, and visual, in the form of statues and architecture, with some painting. The fables, legends, hymns, Bible stories, and reworked pagan myths were mixed together in a complex form, with great regional and linguistic variations, to produce what we classify vaguely as medieval civilization. But it was a civilization. It was not primitive. The cultural shambles left by Rome, after Rome had disintegrated, was reworked by Christians to become a full-fledged culture. (See, for example, William Carroll Bark's *Origins of the Medieval World* and Friedrich Hear's *The Medieval World*, both available in inexpensive paperbacks.)

The question then arises: How was it that pre-Reformation

religion could build up a new, thriving civilization, if the level of theological awareness was so minimal? How could it be that the confused mixtures of paganism, Bible stories, myths, relics, and all the other fragments of medieval Christianity could create the foundation, region by region, of a totally new civilization?

### Biblical Law

It was primarily the rule of biblical law, not the influence of architecture, paintings, or even hymns, that reshaped European life prior to the Reformation. It was the restraining influence of law — family law, church law, business law, and civil law — that provided the West with a new vision. Rushdoony writes of the progress of law after the sixth century:

Roman law now continued in its development, but it became progressively an expression of Biblical law. Justinian's *Institutes* (with the Digest, Code, and Novels, a part of the *Corpus Juris Civilis*) clearly reflects what is now called "natural law," but that concept was now becoming something other than Roman law had known. . . . Natural law, whether in the hands of jurists, scholastics, or Deists, was in essence an anti-Trinitarian doctrine, but it was still more Christian than Roman. Natural law became a form of Christian heresy and ascribed to nature the legislative powers and absolute laws which were clearly borrowed from the God of Scripture. Thus, both Roman law and natural law became so thoroughly Christianized with the centuries that no Roman would have recognized them. Even where the wording of ancient Roman laws was retained, a new content and interpretation rendered the ancient meaning remote and barren ("Notes on the Law in Western Society," *The Institutes of Biblical Law* [Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, 1973], pp. 786-87).

The spread of biblical law across the face of Europe served as an integrating factor. Sharing basic presuppositions, and sharing also a single written language (Latin), scholars throughout Europe had the tools for restructuring the face of

society. Localism was basic to the political and even ecclesiastical institutions of medieval society, but there was also unity with respect to first principles. Applications were local, but the shared frame of reference allowed the intellectual and moral leaders of society to grapple along similar lines with the affairs of life. The division of intellectual labor could therefore be integrated. Each man's moral and intellectual efforts had more opportunity to be translated into action across the whole continent than would have been the case had there been no shared presuppositions. Men's intellectual efforts could therefore become cumulative. Biblical law redirected the paths of human endeavor, generation after generation, into channels that proved to be incredibly productive. Change was slow, but life was not stagnant.

### The Family

However important intellectual life is for a culture, the most important applications of morals, religion, and philosophy are found inside the family unit. This is the universal human institution. The family is the original agency of government, especially self-government. What families believe in terms of their requirements before God is more important for the construction of a civilization than the attitudes of the members of any other institution. It is the family unit which is central for the construction, or reconstruction, of culture.

When we think of the law of Moses, we should never forget the requirement of universal family instruction in biblical law: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart; And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and thou shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (Deut. 6:6-7). The enormous capital resources in time, effort, and personal concern that parents are to expend on their children's legal instruction cannot be overestimated as a factor in cultural and economic growth. Not the state, church, or school, but the family is to be central in legal education. The day-to-day instruction in righteousness which all child-rearing involves is the very heart of a civilization. It is the law-order imparted by parents to children which will **determine the success or failure** of a society.

This instruction may not be self-conscious on the part of parents. This instruction may be simply a series of commands, or punishments, that really is not an integrated program. If so, the children suffer, and the future is compromised. But all parents must instruct children in the law-order of the family, or else chaos results. Parents have a direct incentive to direct their children's footsteps. There can be no family unit without an integrating, disciplining law-order.

When we attempt to reconstruct mentally what local family life may have been like in the medieval world – which means a period of over a thousand years, and tens of thousands of little communities — we can barely imagine what went on. We have only the faintest shadows of the past. Medieval families

did not leave written documents. But we know the results. Agriculture improved. New technologies were invented, capitalized, and exported. The population grew slowly, erratically, but universally, leading to the progressive cultivation of the soil. (See Lynn White, Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* [Oxford University Press, 1966 edition].)

When we look at the results of a thousand years of Christian instruction, from 500 A.D. to 1500 A.D., we begin to perceive the effect of these millions and millions of seemingly infinitesimal additions of moral capital. From the disintegration of Rome until the Reformation, Christian parents built a civilization. However ignorant of theology they may have been, however erroneous in their perception of things spiritual, not to mention things scientific, they nevertheless succeeded in reshaping the history of mankind. Their ignorance did not keep them from outdistancing India, China, and the other ancient civilizations by the end of the medieval period. There was a cumulative effect of the vast number of successive additions of family capital: agricultural, technological, educational, and moral. Line upon line, precept upon precept, a body of moral capital was built up, and it produced a new civilization.

### Conclusion

However important theology may be, it is the application of that theology to specific instances of daily living that makes the difference culturally. Theology is not simply an affair of the educational specialists. Flourishing theology is always practical theology. Theology has implications for every sphere of human existence. It is basic to the successful outworking of God's dominion covenant (Gen. 1:28) that people begin to apply the truths they have learned, especially in family affairs. If theology is untranslated into the little things of life, then it is truncated theology – cut off at the root. If the construction of ever-more finely honed theological formulations does not lead to altered family, church, business, or school operations, then it is dead theology. It was not the incredibly erudite debates of late medieval scholasticism that built medieval culture. Indeed, these debates among the schoolmen were the sign of the strangulation of medieval culture, the end of the line for the medieval world. Theological scholarship, apart from concrete applications, is dead scholarship that leads nowhere. If we are to interpret properly the enormous erudition and mathematical sophistication of today's academic scholarship, we must understand that the Alexandria scholarship of the dying Classical world and the arcane debates of the late medieval world were testimonies to the death of culture, not a new beginning. The dead within the academic world are buried by others using highly polished spades, tools sharpened with such precision that they are suitable only for splitting academic hairs. It is the "little things" of life, restructured in terms of valid applied theology, not the "big things" of the hair-splitters, that determine the future of a civilization.