

# Learned Children

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I have been praying for years for a Christian Renaissance. I invite you to join me!

What will it look like?

It will have to be multi-generational. I am old, but am working toward this goal with all the energy God grants—but so much has been lost, and we need to bring so much to the task. My not yet born grandchildren have an important part to play. How much Lewis and Tolkien knew before they even attended the university—we are sheep among giraffes. They learned the classical languages during elementary school, and had mastered most of the European languages before finishing middle school. This was the old normal, at least for learned youth.

The seminal books that have shaped our culture, that give us the very groundwater we drink every day, were almost all written by learned men, most of whom were radical unbelievers—Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Derrida. You have to go back several hundred years before you find books of comparable cultural influence written by devout believers—Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin. We must read the great books to write them. If we are unable to do this, perhaps our children’s children will. How can we best prepare them?

In a culture struggling with bare literacy, in a country where the ability to speak or read one “foreign” language is thought a mark of genius, where do we begin? Our expectations must not be based on the anomaly that is twenty first century America, but on a standard appropriate to all times and all peoples. Our children, at least some of them, are capable of doing this given the right training and encouragement.

Harbingers of this Christian Renaissance may perhaps be seen in some aspects of the current home school and classical Christian school movements. I teach at a college where some of the finest fruit of these movements come to study. They are wonderful young people, but do not bring to college anything like the knowledge and training of a Lewis or Tolkien, even if they bring much more than I brought in 1970—perhaps their sons and daughters will.

The early church triumphed because they not only out-thought, but also out-lived and out-died the pagan world around them. I often tell my students we don’t want Christian eggheads, but mature and passionate believers who love God with all their heart, soul and strength, as well as their minds. Jesus grew in wisdom, stature, and favor with God and man—physical, spiritual and social, along with intellectual. In this sense a Christian Renaissance must occur within the context of a revival or renewal of life within the church. It must have deep roots in the family and church, and cannot be purely, or even primarily “academic.” As a professor, a “professional reader,” I value getting my hands dirty (and sometimes bloody) through hard physical work and outdoor living, loving God with my strength. Our children with intellectual gifts should be physically vigorous, emotionally and spiritually healthy. They should not be seen as oddballs, Quasimodos.

But they need not hold Ph.D.s in pop cultural literacy. The only word one of my sons missed on an Iowa Skills Test he took in elementary school was “TV.” We have never owned one. Another of my sons took a pop culture literacy quiz in college and scored in the “monastic” category. A few years ago at PHC, students took a kind of “spot poll” among the professors to see if they knew who Paris Hilton was. I did not. That was a revelation to some of them. I know now, but could have lived very happily *never* knowing. I believe very passionately in being in, yet not of the world. We must neither withdraw nor conform. The “neighbors” God calls us to love and reach are our contemporaries. But to know, love and reach them, we need not watch all the television programs they watch.

Jesus at twelve astonished the leading theologians of His day with His knowledge and understanding. At thirty, though He was by training a carpenter and not an “academic,” He demonstrated an understanding of life and the universe that astonished all who heard Him, that far exceeded that of Solomon before Him. Indeed, He spoke with authority, and not like the scribes. Jesus knew the entire Old Testament by heart, and was steeped in history. I have heard trained philosophers say that no one has even been as philosophically astute, as acute a reasoner. As a professor of literature, I have long recognized the magnitude of Jesus’ literary gifts—His teaching is a rhetorical tour de force. Yet the common people heard Him gladly—He was a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Not all of our children will follow Him in these intellectual profundities, but some will. They must be recognized, encouraged, and challenged in our families, churches and schools. They may produce the work of art or scholarship that answers Freud, Marx, Nietzsche and Derrida, that restores us to hope and sanity by restoring us to God.