

A Handful With Quietness

The Christian Break

KARL KELLER

Christianity is a program for *revolution*. That's what I tell my more liberal, anarchic friends in and out of the Church. They never believe me, of course, because they stereotype religious orthodoxy as something rigid, settled, secure, and stony-hearted. When I tell the same thing to my more conservative friends (few as they are), they don't believe me either. They want to believe in something that will preserve values for them, save the past for them, keep body and soul together for them, and they read religion according to their personal insecurities. So I talk to myself about it. These are among my best conversations.

By "revolutionary," however, I don't mean what some others have meant: that Christianity gives a person a whole new way of life to live, or that it is progressive and stimulating, or that its rigidities result in creative rebelliousness, or even that it lifts one's perspective up to the level of the Utopian, the millenarian, the transcendental. Those are generalities that are hard to prove as unique to Christianity — even if such features are true — and "revolutionary" would most certainly be an excessive way of thinking of them anyway.

Where Christianity can most certainly be thought of as revolutionary, as I love to argue whenever I get a chance, is in the *breaks* that it encourages. Christianity has never proved itself very satisfactory as a politics (it fragments as much as it coheres a society) or as an esthetic (it often discourages the arts and distorts what it produces) or even as an ethic (it loves to dehumanize, either with its puritan rigidities or its bathetic emotionalism and sentimentalities). However, what Christianity has always produced, often to the dismay and anger of its own establishmentarians, is a method for change, for progress, for individuality, for revolt.

This method is usually without any leaders, without promoters, however, for it is destructive of the established, the promotable. One is not apt to find anyone on the inside writing about it much; no church teachers would dare say such things. Only the underdog, the outsider, the loner can speak about it, convincing me that perhaps true Christianity has always been mainly an underground movement, a quiet revolution, a private matter. Perhaps it survives best, not as an organization, not as an authority, not even as a theology, but in the form of individual hope — a hope encouraged by the fact that it knows how to break with the past and make a substantially different future. That is where it is effective.

What I mean by *break* is this: the past becomes the future unless in some present moment one initiates an alternative different in method and substance from what has been done already. The past is so phenomenal a burden on us, both individually and collectively, that it continues to dominate all thought and action until one knows a method of reversal, an alternative. Change of attitude, innovation, modification, reconstruction, reorganization, restoration, building onto — none of these is sufficient, for they grow out of what *has* been and only make its continuance more acceptable. The Christian break occurs then when one thinks and acts in reaction against what will be.

Let me illustrate. Repentance is a break with the past, forgiveness a break with one's own emotions, faith a break with fact, hope a break with the determined. Love breaks a pattern of mistrust or hate: if someone hurts you and you don't hurt him back, then the chain of hate is broken, but if you hurt him in return for hurt and he does the same, there is no end to the fighting and the injury. Mercy does the same thing: even if an injustice has been done you, there is no change in the injustice if justice is done in return, but only if one is, instead, merciful, kind, forgiving, sincere, loving. Then change is possible. Honesty breaks a pattern of corruption. Forgiveness breaks a pattern of mistrust. Kindliness breaks a pattern of oppression. Humility breaks a pattern of arrogance and ignorant pride. The genealogy of the world is an ugly pattern in which hate begets hate, war begets war, meanness begets meanness, oppression begets oppression. In the humbler Christian virtues is the power to break these. It is good for Christians to realize that about the only form of organization inherent to Christianity is *break, revolt, reversal*. It is the very opposite of program, organization, church. Robert Lowell has written these good lines:

*Christ, also, our only king without a sword,
turning the word forgiveness to a sword.*

These are easily exploitable virtues, however, and perhaps that is why political and religious leaders push them so hard. A nation (or a church membership, for that matter) that is humble, sincere, loyal, kindly, forgiving, meek, and faithful is a nation (or a church membership) under someone's thumb — or under someone's foot. But what the exploiter

may not know is that the person who lives by these virtues has often achieved a life separate from the exploiter and by them is free of him. In this way Christianity is liberating. That Christianity in which one conforms, submits, is loyal to commands, conforms to the established, is blindly faithful to the given, heeds authority, finds security in law and order, is another kind of Christianity altogether: it is a trap. Radical Christianity is different in that it makes anarchic breaks with the past, the status quo, the inevitable, and it does so, not by regarding these virtues passively merely, or intellectually merely, or sentimentally merely, but by using them to actually change things for the better. They are active principles for breaking up the world. The New Testament, like the Old, is a manual for revolution.

The conventional argument I have heard all my life against extensive personal use of The Christian Break that I am trying to describe is the self-serving position that kind-

liness and forgiveness get smashed, that nice people get hurt, that Christian nations get beat. The position is both right and wrong-headed, since revolutionary Christianity has much more to do with dignity than with survival. Of course it is axiomatic that if someone cuts off your hand you don't give him your other hand if you want to play the piano. You don't stop bludgeoning a nation to death when it insults you and kicks you in the shins if you want to go on controlling the world. But then Christianity never did have very much to do with survival or with power, only with the *quality* of one's survival, the *quality* of one's life. And there it is revolutionary. To survive in the world one may unfortunately find it necessary to compromise with the world, help continue its rotten patterns, embody its stink, but to give it some quality, some meaning, one may have to break with it, even with oneself — Christianly. What else works?

A Peculiar People **Out of Limbo.**

SAMUEL W. TAYLOR

Particularly since he had been a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, loss of church membership was shattering to my father's professional, social and business affairs. One day John W. Taylor was revered as one of the Lord's anointed; the next, he found fair-weather friends crossing the street to avoid him. Business ventures collapsed; credit ceased. But what hurt most was that a man for whom the Church had been his entire life — he'd been an apostle since the age of twenty-five — now couldn't enter a chapel nor partake of the sacrament.

However, he made no complaints. In marrying plural wives after the Manifesto he had taken a calculated risk; he accepted without rancor the penalty for public exposure. And he remained serene about the ultimate verdict in the hereafter. "Things will be straightened out," he said, "over there."

Members of the family, however, were concerned about his status in limbo. Ten years after John W. Taylor's death my brother Raymond made inquiries as to what could be done to get him officially reinstated to Church membership. The reply offered the type of encouragement given by a doctor to someone with terminal cancer: there is always hope. Raymond received no intimation, however, that prospects for John W. Taylor's immortal soul to be delivered from Satan's buffetings could be realized in the foreseeable future.

A concerted effort by members of the great family might have created momentum; but the six widows and swarm of progeny were all

characterized by spirit, independence, and individuality. They could agree on nothing. (Even the simple matter of selecting a headstone involved a hassle that went on year after year while the temporary marker rotted away and it was distinctly possible that when the stone finally was placed it might be at the wrong grave).

One faction held firmly to the whispered rumor that John W. Taylor hadn't *really* been cut off at all (it was an empty form to appease the outside world). If this actually was the situation, Raymond felt it was high time for our father's name to be taken out of the shadows.

The ironical aspect of the whole thing was that John W. Taylor's troubles resulted from sheer bad luck. The matter of his plural wives became a *cause célèbre* during Senate hearings in the Smoot Investigation of 1904-1906. Except for this, he and his families would have lived quietly with nothing ever done about it. When I was a boy in Provo, everyone knew of plural families, the wives too young to have been married before the Manifesto; there were examples in every neighborhood. We knew the "old maids" who actually were secret plural wives. The Manifesto of 1890 had been interpreted in different ways. Actually there was not one but several, the last coming some fourteen years after the first. In 1910 the Salt Lake *Tribune* published a list of 220 men of standing in the Church who had taken wives after the 1890 date. John W. Taylor was only one of six members of the Quorum of the