

Give and Take

THE CHRISTIAN REVOLUTIONARY

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As I ponder the divisive national debate about the Equal Rights Amendment and the pained cries for reform by many women in the Church, I find myself in an ambivalent position. On the one hand, I am very sympathetic with the causes espoused. On the other, my Christian sensibilities are disturbed by the impatient discontent and increasing militancy of these groups. I feel the same way about almost every campaign for either political or ecclesiastical reform.

For me, some worthy causes include: an economic system based on cooperation instead of competition, the use of participative instead of authoritarian styles of leadership based on mutual esteem rather than position, unassuming service instead of careerism, and the adorning of the heart instead of the body.

Although I support the purposes of those who champion the above and other causes, I am persuaded that the methods by which a Christian dissents—rebels—to effect change are radically different from those legitimately used in political systems. It seems to me that Mormons who would be revolutionaries should consider the following.

1. The Church and its members should indeed be revolutionary. Joseph Smith worked to "lay the foundation that will revolutionize the world," and Brigham Young tirelessly labored to establish a society that would overturn "every foolish and unprofitable custom, every unjust and oppressive law, and what ever else that is oppressive to man." Harold B. Lee reaffirmed that the Church stands "as a continuing revolution against the norms of a society that fall below the standards of the Gospel."

2. Christians should also be conservative about righteous things. "Prove all things, hold fast to that which is good," explained Paul.

However, too often Mormons reflexively hold fast to that which simply is—regardless of its worth. And as a result of our indiscriminate conservation we are rarely in the forefront of worthy revolutionary causes. "With some of us it is the custom to do very much that what the world does," lamented Joseph F. Smith. "We dress as the world. We seek its pleasures; we follow its customs; and . . . those things bring us into conflict with things the Lord has . . . commanded us to do." Fortunately, by following the world we often champion some good causes, too. But there is no guarantee that we do so in the proper manner or that such causes are the most important ones.

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3. Christians effect change through love. "If you have not charity you can do nothing," asserted Paul. Is it any mystery, then, why most reform efforts fail? Political contention—any contention—lacks love. Christian revolutionaries must love and forgive their enemies, persuade but never coerce. They are bold but never overbearing, meek and humble rather than proud and self-assured. Polarization between good people is not Christian.

4. The Christian revolutionary begins with the individual and ends with society. The Zion utopia requires citizens whose basic natures are better—the "born again" individual instead of the "natural man." Hence the Christian revolution is first of all internal. Then it is interpersonal, through strengthening the Saints and proselyting others.

Finally, when enough people have been converted, the revolution can be collective, affecting governments and other social institutions.

In contrast the world's revolutionaries alter governments, compel behavior, but rarely change hearts. The world's revolutions focus on appearance, Christ's on substance.

This is why Christian revolutionaries cannot be touched by governments and are usually not seen as threats to sovereignty. Indeed, Christians support governments, which provide needed order and services, while they labor for a better system.

5. Christian revolutionaries are patient. Impatience results from lack of faith in a cause. Because of their faith, Christians are sure of ultimate success. The impatience of most cause fighters—in society and the Church—results in contention and creates more problems than are remedied. Most revolutionaries have grievances, but Christians have griefs.

6. There is a hierarchy of causes. Revolutionaries cannot fight all worthy causes and therefore must first select the weightier over the lighter and more diverting ones. Concerning selecting causes, President Kimball has counseled: "Be careful to select good causes. There are so many to which you can give yourself fully and freely and which will produce much joy and happiness for you and for those you serve. There are other causes . . . which may seem more fashionable and which may produce the applause of the world, but they are usually more selfish in nature. These latter causes tend to arise out of what the scriptures call the 'commandments of men' rather than the commandments of God. Such causes have some virtues and some usefulness, but they are not as important as those causes which grow out of keeping the commandments of God."

That this paradoxically meek, humble, and non-threatening style can truly effect change is shown in the remarkable life of Christ, in his dealings with people and governments, and in the lives of many of his disciples, including Ammon, the son of Mosiah, who, finding himself in a polarized political world, brought revolutionary change in his lifetime through non-threatening love and service.

The marvel and the wonder of the latter-days is how the "weak things" of the world overthrew it nonviolently.