



The Snare of Reactionism

Based on a sermon by R. M.

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Our Lord and Savior clothed Himself with humility. When wronged or challenged, He responded with a meek spirit. Can we, as God's children, refrain from reacting wrongly when we feel that the church or some individual has deceived us? If there is anything that "destabilizes" church life, I believe it is *reactions* to the things that come into our lives. I have personally seen the damage and negative effect—the snare—of reaction. And let me just say that I am as vulnerable to reaction as anyone.

Ephesians 5:15-18 gives us the following admonition: See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.

My concern and desire is that we be controlled by the Holy Spirit and that nothing contaminates or takes away from that control. Reactionism is one of those things that can and will come into our lives and control our actions, thoughts, and direction. Let's compare the above verse with a person living in reaction.

We are told to "walk circumspectly." A reactionary person does not do this, but rather walks as a fool who is only focused on one thing. Others see his folly, but he cannot see it.

Next, the verses tell us "understanding what the will of the Lord is." Reactionism is like a remote control hooked to our mind, controlling our every action, rather than the Holy Spirit leading us into the will of the Lord.

Then we are told, "be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess." Although the verse specifically mentions wine, I think we could replace the word "wine" with anything that causes us to not think soberly or soundly. Reactionism is an intoxication; we become obsessed with something and it controls our thinking and our actions.

Action in reverse

The dictionary defines "reaction" as "a reverse or opposing action." Let's look at four points about this reversing or opposing action:

1. What reaction is.
2. Why we react.
3. The result of reaction.
4. Avoiding reaction.

As we look at reactionism, we are going to use the Pharisees as an example. The Pharisees formed as a group about a century and a half before the coming of Christ. They came together as a result of problems, real problems. After the captivity, the Jewish people experienced many ups and downs between the time of Ezra and Christ. At the return to Jerusalem with Ezra, it appears that the scribes and the priests worked in unison. But as time went on, the scribes developed into their own denomination within Judaism and became known as the Pharisees. They developed as a response to a tendency within Judaism to leave out details of the ceremonial law. As this tendency developed, some concerned people got together and said, "We're going to fix this problem. We're going to keep the Law!"

They probably had good intentions, but they ended up as a reactionary movement because of what they became 150 years later. When Messiah came, they didn't (as a whole) recognize Him because of their reactionary tendencies. This is very sad because that is the last place they would have originally wanted to go.

How did that happen?

When the Pharisees formed as a group, they were from the scribes, and the Sadducees were from the priests. It appears that during the time of the Greek occupation of Israel, the observance of the ceremonial law was at a low ebb among the chief priests and rulers of the people. The Pharisee movement was formed as a response to this neg-

ligence. Their focus was to keep the law that the priests and rulers were holding in low esteem.

What is reaction?

One form of reaction is when two incompatible things try to mix. Certain chemicals react when they come in contact. In fact, some chemical reactions cause certain substances to change into some other substance.

The same thing can happen to people; when we react, we actually become something we didn't start out being. Something or someone makes a tremendous impression on us and we decide—consciously or subconsciously—that we will NEVER do THAT!

The result is a reaction that changes our lives. The problem is not in the “action,” but in the “re-” part of reaction. When problems occur, we should act, not react.

Why we react

We react because we see the effect of someone's error and we want to avoid those effects. We tend to react harder against those who are closer to us, and even more so if their wrongdoing is against us. When we look at the results of someone else's wrongdoing, and add a little bit of self-righteousness ... that is where I believe the “re-” in reaction comes from. A little bit of self, mixed with someone doing us wrong, and BANG, we get that “reaction.”

On the other hand, if we take a picture of someone's life—the whole picture—and add the Holy Spirit, we will end up with “action.” The equations look like this:

Effect of someone's negative action on our life
+ self in our life
reaction

Effect of someone's negative action on our life
+ Holy Spirit
action

We react against many people, but more so if the person(s) is/are close to us: fathers, mothers, our bishop, ministers, church, or church groups. Think of your worst enemy, and then think about whether you have any reaction against them. We become more vulnerable to reaction when we experience some sort of break with people we have been associated with in the past. Not all breaks with the past, of course, are wrong. Church divisions are ripe breeding grounds for reactionism. We see it happen so often: someone leaves a church and they start making bad choices and changes, and you have to wonder, “Where will they stop?” This is often because of reactionism against their past.

The results of reactionism

We will look at the Pharisees for results, but let's remember to look at ourselves as we consider these things. The first result is *inconsistency*. Those in reaction may be really strong on one point, but the next one they totally miss. Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 23:4 where the Pharisees bound heavy burdens on people but would not help them carry the load.

The next result of reactionism is *blindness*. The Pharisees could see gnats really well, but missed the camels. This becomes a bondage, but the person in bondage will not even know it. They say, “THIS is what controls THEM, and I'M NOT going to let IT happen to me. Let all THAT go; don't mess with IT.”

Sad to say, THIS, THAT, and IT actually ends up controlling the person trying to stay away from THIS, THAT, and IT, because they are not able to unbiasedly evaluate THIS, THAT, and IT. They say, “I can't do THIS, because back there, those people did THAT.” So “those people's” THAT ends up controlling the person's decisions.

The third result of reactionism is *self-defense*. Luke 10:25-29 gives us a good example of this. Assuming that this was a Pharisee (which it may not have been), we see someone who may have had such a concern for the ceremonial law that he could not see the practical application of loving his neighbor. When Jesus asked him a simple question, he (v. 29) tried to “justify himself” and legalistically asked “who is my neighbor?”

The fourth result of reactionism is an *increasing self-righteousness* as seen in Luke 18 with the Pharisee and the publican. We can think ourselves to be righteous because we look at those we are reacting against and say, “We are NOT like THAT!” And of course, “THAT” refers to something bad in the other person, something we are reacting against.

The fifth result of reacting is *the inability to benefit from the input of others*. When we react we tend to compare ourselves to others and that makes us immune to their input. So, we do not get the help that God is trying to give us through another brother ... or from other churches that we are reacting against.

The sixth result of reaction is *hypocrisy*. Matthew 23:27-28 talks about the Pharisees “appearing to be righteous.” The reason reactionism brings hypocrisy is because our life is led by ulterior motives, not led by the Holy Spirit. We are blinded into thinking we are something that we are not, because all we can see is that we are NOT LIKE THEM, and THEY ARE WRONG.

The seventh result of reactionism is that *we end up with the same fruit of the very people we are trying not*

to be like. Have you ever seen that, and wondered how it could be? Someone trying not to be like another person or group, yet ending up with the same fruit? The reason is simple: neither one is led by the Spirit, so neither one has the fruit of the Spirit.

For example, suppose that my father was a strong disciplinarian and I said that I am never going to act like he did. He was unbalanced in relation to discipline, and I end up unbalanced in relation to love. So I don't discipline my children as I ought. The result is basically the same: a lack of relationship, a hardening of the children, and a rebelliousness of the same. That is why we cannot afford to react. We CANNOT afford it!

We may have a legalistic bishop or a legalistic church, and we come out of it and think, "We are never going to be legalistic!" Then we end up being legalistic ... it's just one of those laws of nature, so to speak. This happens because we have taken our focus off of God and put it on *not being like them*. When our focus gets off of God, we will become legalistic because we are not being led by the Spirit.

Avoiding reaction

In one sense, we can't altogether avoid reaction. But we *can* minimize the results. The only way to avoid reaction is to be rid of all self. Maybe a better way to say it is to say that once we think we are totally rid of all reaction then we probably are not. We can allow God to neutralize our past reactions by letting Him lead us from here on out by His Spirit. There are several points to help us in this.

First, we need to learn humility. Some of the Pharisees recognized Jesus when He came, and I believe these were the humble ones. What made Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Gamaliel recognize the Messiah? I believe humility paid a large role in that!

Galatians 6:3 tells us, "For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself." Paul needed to say that because—even though it is an obvious truth—we don't always recognize it. Humility opens the door for us, and pride closes it.

Secondly—and may I add that these three points are a package, you can't have one without the others—we need to learn to appreciate those people who we don't appreciate ... those who have done us harm in the past. That does not mean we just ignore the things they have done, but we need to look at the good they have done to us as well. Parents, church leaders, teachers, other church fellowships ... whoever they may be that you feel "missed

it." Find out where they "hit it!" And, appreciate them for that. This point and humility go hand in hand. God can bless this kind of action and use it to help neutralize any reaction of the past.

Thirdly—and this follows on the heels of the previous point—thank God AND thank THEM for the influence they have had on your life. It may be one of the most difficult things we have ever done. If we live in these three points, we can be released from the control of reactionism. The Holy Spirit can enter our lives and control us.

Joseph's example

In closing I would like to look at the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 50. Joseph's brothers had abused him; in fact, abused and rejected in unquestionable terms.

But notice what happened ... Joseph actually learned to appreciate those very abusive brethren. And he thanked God for it! Genesis 50:15-21:

And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said, Joseph will peradventure hate us, and will certainly requite us all the evil which we did unto him. And they sent a messenger unto Joseph, saying, Thy father did command before he died, saying, So shall ye say unto Joseph, Forgive,

I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil: and now, we pray thee, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of thy father.

Now let's look at Joseph's response. Notice that he does not just ignore the fact that they abused him, but it does not control his response in any way. This liberated him to say and do the following:

And Joseph wept when they spake unto him. And his brethren also went and fell down before his face; and they said, Behold, we be thy servants. And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them.

If we can act toward our abusers the same way that Joseph acted toward his brothers, then we can be delivered from reaction and be a blessing to all around us! ~

It is easier to see reaction in others than to see it in ourselves.