Sunday, February 6, 1972
ACTION OR REACTION
I Peter 2

Sydney J. Harris, a newspaper columnist, related the following incident: “I walked with my friend, a Quaker, to the newsstand the other night, and he bought a paper and thanked the newsman politely. The newsman didn’t even acknowledge it.” “A sullen fellow, isn’t he?” I commented. “Oh, he’s that way every night,” shrugged my friend. “Then why do you continue being so polite to him?” I asked. “Why not?” inquired my friend. “Why should I let him decide how I’m going to act?”

Mr. Harris said that as he thought more about this incident, it occurred to him that the operating word was “act.” This Quaker Christian “acts” toward people; most of us “react.” He has a sense of inner balance, a sense of security and self-worth — which is often lacking in many people. He knows who he is, what he stands for, and how he should behave. His actions are not dependent on what happens to him but come from an inner spirit and motive. Thus, no sullen or impolite character is going to disturb the equilibrium of his nature. He simply refuses to return insult for insult, because then he would no longer be in command of his own conduct, but would be a mere responder, a reflector.

This episode, this modern-day parable, reminds us of the way in which the writer of 1 Peter remembered Jesus. He recalls that when Jesus was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he trusted in Him who judges justly.

The disciple Peter was evidently much impressed by this particular trait in Jesus, for Peter himself was an ardent firebrand of a man, full of tinder and temper. When he saw Jesus act, he could well imagine how he himself would have reacted.

Action or reaction? Most of us react, and no one is unhappier than the perpetual reactor — for he is not free. His spiritual temperature is always being raised or lowered by the social climate around him, and he becomes a mere creature at the mercy of these elements.

Think about it! Don’t we often, like Peter and unlike Jesus, have the tendency to react and not simply act from our own faith and convictions? Thus, as reactors, praise gives us an over-inflated feeling of elation, which can be false because it does not last, and it does not come from self-approval. On the other hand, criticism can depress us more than it should because it confirms our own secret shaky opinion of ourselves. Thus, snubs hurt us, and the merest suspicion of unpopularity in any quarter rouses us to bitterness or aggressiveness or querulousness.

We’ve all had this experience. Maybe only a saint never reacts. But our problem is that we, because we are not always the masters of our own actions and attitudes, because we lack a certain spiritual depth that can give a foundation for our actions, we let others determine whether we shall be rude or gracious, elated or depressed. We become other-directed people, basing our actions primarily on what other people will think of us, or merely reacting to the way they treat us. We then are no longer free but are more like a bouncing ball that someone else is bouncing.

Consider some of the ways in which we often react! Some of us have a sort of pulley system of evaluating people, including ourselves. On this pulley system, we go up when someone else

goes down, and we go down when someone else goes up. Our emotional position keeps shifting in relation to the outside world.

We forget, for example, that if I meet a man who preaches better than I do, this does not diminish my own talents. I still have exactly what I had before, no more and no less. His own gifts do not devalue mine, nor mine devalue someone else's.

Yet many of us judge ourselves and others on this false basis. If we meet someone richer, we feel poorer; someone handsomer, we feel ugly; someone more fluent, we feel tongue-tied; if they are up, we are down.

Conversely, many of us cannot feel comfortable unless we are pulling others down. We rise only by their lowliness; if he is uglier, I am handsomer; if he is failing, then I am doing better; if he is poorer, then I am richer.

An older farmer was moodily regarding the ravages of a flood. "Hiram," yelled a neighbor, "your pigs were all washed down the creek." "How about Thompson's pigs?" he asked. "They're gone too! And Larsen's?" "Yes!" "Humph," said the farmer, cheering up. "Taint as bad as I thought."

Again, recall the words of 1 Peter: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted in Him who judges justly!"

Our human society is not a pulley system. God has not made us or the world so that we improve only at the expense of others going down, or vice versa. To do so is to react instead of act. But the truth is — we each have our own value, our own distinctive gifts and limitations. That's the good news of the gospel! To act and not merely react implies the acceptance of God's world, the acceptance of ourselves and others, knowing that God is the only ultimate judge of our real worth. And we are not judged by Him in comparison with others, but as individuals.

Now consider another way in which we as individuals react instead of act. A person I know, whom I had always considered a calm and stable personality, told me recently that he is regarded in some quarters as a wild-eyed radical and in other circles as a stony conservative — when actually he is neither. "It's an irresistible urge I have when I get together with extremists," he said. "I promptly swing over to the other extreme, just because I am so irritated with their one-sided view."

Isn't that the tendency of most of us? When we confront an extremist, we become a passionate defender of the opposite view. We seem to want to show them how one-sided their position is, although we never succeed. What we do is become one-sided ourselves because of our reaction. Again, you see, this is reaction, instead of action. Our position does not come from our own inner convictions but is determined by the point of view of others.

This is similar to another kind of reacting, found in young people and in adults as well. I am referring to that kind of action best described as rebellion. Thus, if our parents were fanatically devout, we become fanatically irreligious. A man's relatives are dogmatically conservative, so he is dogmatically radical.

As young people, we often like to become the opposite of our parents. And when we rebel and react, we think we have burst the bonds of our enslavement and are free. But such is not the

case. We have traded one form of bondage for another. We are as enslaved as before. For to always rebel and do the opposite is certainly a form of bondage.

All parents have used the familiar trick of telling the child one thing so that he will do exactly the opposite, which is what the parents wanted him to do in the first place. Sometimes we call this psychology.

Freedom from parental domination does not necessarily mean to defy them or despise them, but to accept them for what they are and to make life's decisions that are based on good reason, on one's own ideas and research, and not only on blind rebellion. And I want to say to the young people here, as well as the older, that if sometimes your ideas happen to agree with those of your parents, that's nothing to be ashamed of. We are to act and not merely react.

In the same way, the woman who hates the man she once loved is not free from him but is as much a slave to her negative passions as she formerly was to her positive passion.

The point is that when we react instead of act, we are usually allowing our decisions to be made indirectly by someone else. We are not acting from our own inner convictions and faith. To be free in the fullest sense does not mean to reject what our fathers and mothers believed; it means to select, to learn from the past, to make decisions then on our own and not merely to react.

On the other hand, as parents, we often react toward our children instead of acting. Our child will say to us in a moment of anger, "I hate you!" We're horrified and react to the child's outburst by saying, "Don't ever say such a thing," or we say something much worse! We react and are horrified because we're hurt — hurt that our child might hate us for a moment when we think we've done so much for that child.

If we're not just reacting, we might say something like, "I can understand why you feel hate toward me. I have the same feelings at times." Here we are being honest with the child, accepting his feelings and not simply reacting to them. It's an attempt at understanding and can make all the difference in the world.

In the same way, we husbands react to our wives instead of listening and attempting to understand, and wives often react to husbands. When we merely react, communication is broken off. Relationships are severed and hard to repair.

But why do we often react in these and other situations? Undoubtedly, there are many reasons and motives. In the case of returning insult for insult, we are attempting to hurt the other person for hurting us — an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

In the case of the pulley system of evaluating people, our motive is our own upgrading. It is our attempt to increase our value in our own eyes at the expense of others.

In the case of rebellion and going to the opposite extreme, we want to hurt the other and at the same time free ourselves; and in the case of reacting to our children who say things that we do not like to hear, we are again reacting out of our own self-concern.

In all of our reacting, we lack an inner sense of purpose, conviction, and power with which to direct our actions regardless of what people think or do.

What does all of this have to do with our Christian Faith?

First, God is a God of action and not merely reaction. The Bible contains the story of God's actions, and we believe that God continues to act in the world and on our behalf. To say that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son is to speak of action. God acts out of His love for us.

And look at the life and ministry of Jesus. Look at the way in which He treated people, loved them, accepted them. If He had only reacted to them, He would not have died on the cross.

Recall some of the teachings of Jesus. In the parable of the prodigal son, if the father had only reacted, he would've told the son, "You are not welcome here. You left me! And after all I had done for you!" But no! The father "acted" toward the son — welcomed him back. And this is the way God acts toward us and the way we are to act toward others.

In another place, Jesus said, "If you merely love those who love you (and this kind of love is pure reaction) what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? But," said Jesus, "love your enemies, and do good to those who persecute you. Be merciful, even as your Father in heaven is merciful." We are to act because God acts toward us.

You know, we often tend to think of God in our own image, instead of thinking of ourselves in the image of God. Thus, we think that God should be in a state of constant fury with the wicked. On the other hand, the idea that God should be kind toward those who are defying or disobeying His laws seems to us a monstrous injustice. Like the disciples, we want to call down fire from heaven to destroy the wicked.

Perhaps that's why Peter seemed to remember above everything else about Jesus — that when He was reviled, He did not revile in return. This was so much the opposite of Peter's nature and ours.

Thus, action and not merely reaction is part of the behavior of Christians, part of the new behavior of Christians, part of the new creation in Christ.

It is part of that more excellent way of human relationships which Paul describes in his letter to the church at Corinth: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Love is action toward and on behalf of others, not mere reaction.

But you say, "That's nice in theory. Maybe the Quaker Christian can treat the newsman politely each day, even though he is sullen. And certainly, Jesus could, when He was reviled, not revile in return, but can we?" Can I? Whence comes the power for action and not just reaction?

Such power comes from God, and it can best be described as God working in us and through us. We have this treasure in earthen vessels. This power begins to work within us when we begin to act toward people instead of reacting. It doesn't just happen automatically or immediately.

Too often we have made the Christian faith a kind of performance to please an external God; rather, our faith is about the invasion of our lives by a new quality of life — nothing less than

the life of God Himself. Startling results are bound to follow in human life once the truth is accepted and acted upon that God actually lives and operates through us.

There comes in being an “acting” person rather than a “reacting” one a freedom, a way of victorious living that persons do not otherwise know. There is an expansion of one’s life, of one’s joy, satisfaction, and excitement that is not found in any other way. Each moment is an opportunity to act and expand our lives from this center.

So, beginning now, in your relationships, when you meet new situations, new people, new problems, and old ones, ask in each case — am I acting or reacting? Your life, too, can be determined by the power of God within you, instead of mere reaction to forces outside you. Amen.