

John Berridge
on
Progressive Sanctification

John Berridge (1716-1793) was, as Nigel R.Pibworth described him, an ‘individual’, one who demonstrated ‘a singular spirituality’.¹ One-time senior fellow at Clare College, Cambridge, in 1755 Berridge was installed as the Anglican incumbent at the village of Everton on the borders of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire. Even so, he was, as yet, unconverted. At that time, he held to – and preached – salvation by works and the acceptance of orthodox theology. But towards the end of 1757, he was converted. Let his epitaph, which he himself prepared, tell the story – as it does to this day in the churchyard at Everton, where it speaks to all who will read and heed it:

Reader art thou born again?
No salvation without a new birth.
I was born in sin Feb. 1716
Remained ignorant of my fallen state till 1730
Lived proudly on faith & works for salvation till 1754
Admitted to Everton vicarage 1755
Fled to Jesus alone for refuge 1756²
Fell asleep in Christ Jan. 22nd 1793

Berridge, now converted, was soon branded as a Methodist. I do not mean in the denominational sense; I am using the term as in the mid 18th century, as it applied to Berridge and his fellow-Methodists at the time – men such as George Whitefield, the

¹ See the two volumes by Nigel R.Pibworth: *The Gospel Pedlar: The Story of John Berridge and the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, Evangelical Press, Welwyn, 1987 and *The Letters of John Berridge of Everton: A Singular Spirituality*, Joshua Press, Kitchener, 2015.

² This date is wrong. It should be 1757. See Pibworth: *Letters* p21.

Wesley brothers, William Grimshaw, John Fletcher and the like.³ In his enthusiasm for preaching the gospel, Berridge refused to be confined to his own pulpit. Breaking the rules of the State Church, he itinerated widely in his local counties, preaching in the open air, in barns and the like. He also supported other preachers – financially, sacrificially – in furthering this spread of the gospel. As a result, in time, independent churches, nonconformist churches, sprang up as a direct consequence of these labours.

But Berridge was not only at home when preaching to the labouring classes in the villages. Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, recognised his talents, and made extensive use of him, not least to preach the gospel among the upper classes and the fashionable in London and Bath. Berridge would also spend the winter months (when the unmade roads were unfit for his itinerating travels) preaching in London, taking Whitefield's place when he was unwell or away preaching.

Berridge, it goes without saying, met with fierce opposition for all this. Just one example must suffice. John Green, Master of Corpus Christi, and Dean of Lincoln, attacked Berridge on the grounds that:

1. Berridge relied on the supernatural; his work was 'unreasonable'.

³ 'Methodist preachers were notorious for their enthusiastic sermons and often accused of fanaticism. In those days, many members of England's established Church feared that... doctrines promulgated by the Methodists – such as the necessity of a new birth for salvation, of justification by faith, and of the constant and sustained action of the Holy Spirit upon the believer's soul – would produce ill effects upon weak minds'. 'During the 18th century... Methodists... were accused of blind enthusiasm, a charge against which they defended themselves by distinguishing fanaticism from "religion of the heart". Such "enthusiasts" looked for the demonstration of the Spirit in power'. Remember, 'the word "enthusiast" was originally used to refer to a person possessed by a god' (Wikipedia). Do not miss the idea of 'possession': 'a man possessed'.

2. His preaching of free grace and election was welcomed by the poor because it gave them inflated notions of their interest in heaven.

3. Berridge preached justification by faith alone.

4. His 'easier' gospel encouraged antinomianism.

I leave Berridge's fascinating story there. I recommend Pibworth's books. In his latest volume, he has done the evangelical world an immense service by his prolonged labours in collecting, thoroughly editing and publishing his subject's letters. Of course, Berridge's language is quaint, and his humour dry. But as Pibworth's chosen title puts it, in reading the letters we are brought face to face with 'a singular spirituality'.

And that is why have I want to introduce Berridge to a wider audience by means of this brief article. On reading the letters, I came across a gem on the subject of progressive sanctification. Having recently published works on this vital topic myself,⁴ and seeing it is still such a hot potato, I felt I ought to make Berridge's views more widely known.

Berridge wrote the letter in question to John Thornton (1720-1790), a godly man, very rich, one who did an immense amount of good with his money.⁵ He and Berridge were spiritual friends over many years. On August 18th 1773, Berridge wrote to Thornton, and in course of his letter addressed the subject of sanctification. Before I quote, let me explain my interpolations. When Berridge spoke of 'sanctification', he was referring to that aspect of sanctification commonly known as 'progressive sanctification' – the believer's growth in grace and Christ-likeness. Furthermore, when he rightly linked this progressive sanctification with the believer's justification, I would extend this

⁴ See my *Fivefold Sanctification; Positional Sanctification: Two Consequences; Believers Under the Law of Christ*. See also my articles and video clips on the subject (on sermonaudio.com and youtube.com).

⁵ It is estimated he gave away £15 million in today's money (Pibworth: *Letters* p184).

to the believer's positional sanctification in Christ at the point of faith.⁶

Berridge opened the subject thus:

I trust the Lord has taught me to hate sin, and to hunger after righteousness; yet I am often seeking after holiness in such a manner as stiffens my heart, brings a dry and lean soul, and makes my eyes lose the sight of Christ's salvation. This convinces me there is a mystery in the manner of obtaining [progressive] sanctification that we are not soon acquainted with; we are apt to consider [progressive] sanctification as a separate work from justification, following after it, and wholly independent of it; whereas they seem to be connected works, and inseparable from each other, one resulting from the other.

I pause. Berridge was clearly speaking from his heart and experience – not only during his unregenerate days, but even now that he was converted. Furthermore, he was speaking scripturally, smacking the nail right on its head:

The clearer sight we get of Christ, and the sweeter views we have of our adoption, the more our hearts are filled with love, joy, peace, and all the fruits of the Spirit, which is [progressive] sanctification. When Jesus gives a clearer view of his dying love, he always accompanies that view with the graces of the Spirit. The heart is filled at the same time with pardon and holiness, with justification and sanctification; so that if we desire to be holy, we must seek to be happy in the Saviour's love, must seek a clear evidence of our adoption,⁷ and labour to keep it clear. As our views of Christ are more cloudy and discouraging, our bosoms will be more barren of heavenly [influences or feelings].

Berridge then dealt with a common mistake. Many confuse natural ('constitutional' was his word) 'pleasant' characteristics with progressive sanctification. Not so, said Berridge:

A man may be constitutionally meek as the lamb, constitutionally kind as the spaniel, constitutionally cheerful as

⁶ For my reasons, see the works just mentioned.

⁷ In the context, I interpret this to mean that we should cultivate the sense of our adoption. This is right.

the lark, and constitutionally modest as the owl, but these are not [progressive] sanctification.

So what, where – who! – is the source of the believer's progressive sanctification? Berridge:

No sweet, humble, heavenly [influences or feelings], no sanctifying graces are found but from the cross. Jesus says: 'He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has (or possesses) eternal life' [John 6:54]. [Here Jesus] shows how eternal life (which must comprise the whole of spiritual life) is obtained; namely, by eating his flesh and drinking his blood; that is, by feeding on his atonement. Thus all divine life, and all the precious fruits of it – pardon, peace and holiness – spring from the cross... Get holiness by clear views of the cross, and find eternal life by feeding on the Saviour's flesh and blood. Was not a lamb sacrificed every morning and evening in the Jewish temple? And was not this intended to show us, that we must feed on Christ's atonement every day, and derive all our life, the life of peace and holiness, from his death?

Berridge then showed his pastoral heart and skill:

Upright people are often coming to me with complaints, and telling me, that since they received pardon, and have been seeking after [progressive] sanctification (as a separate work) their hearts are become exceeding dry and barren. I ask them how they find their heart when Jesus shows his dying love. They tell me, full of peace, and love, and every heavenly [influence or feeling]. Then I answer, Jesus hereby shows you, that holiness as well as pardon is to be had from the blood of the cross.

Berridge issued a warning:

Labour therefore to get your conscience sprinkled every day with the atoning blood, and [progressive] sanctification will ensue of course... When Jesus only gives a smile, and seals some promise on the heart, though it be not the seal of pardon, it occasions a sweet transforming change in the soul; and all fancied [progressive] sanctification, which does not arise wholly from the blood of the cross, is nothing better than Pharisaism; and if persisted in, will end in Pharisaism. For when [progressive] sanctification is considered as a separate work from justification, and wholly independent of it, by and by it is considered as a justifying work itself; and men profess and

preach they are first to be justified by the blood of Christ, and then by their own obedience.

As Berridge said, getting this wrong soon leads to the false notion that progressive sanctification – and, ultimately, salvation itself – comes by dint of human works and merit. Berridge, himself, of course, had long laboured under such a delusion and preached it. No more! As he said, once again speaking clearly from his heart:

Oh... if we would be holy, we must get to the cross, and dwell there; else notwithstanding all our labour and diligence, and fasting and praying, and good works, we shall be yet void of real [progressive] sanctification, destitute of those humble, sweet, and gracious [influences or feelings] which accompany a clear view of the cross.

Berridge had another warning:

But mere doctrinal knowledge will not give us this view; it only proceeds from a lively faith wrought in us by the Prince of life. A legal spirit helps forward our mistake in the matter of [progressive] sanctification. We would fain... separate [progressive] sanctification from justification, that we may make merit of it, as the foundry people⁸ do. Whereas, if they are inseparably connected, and both pardon and holiness spring from the blood of the cross, the root of merit is dug up thereby, and Christ is all in all.

And that is not all:

Another thing confirms our mistake, which is, that all heavenly graces are called fruits of the Spirit. Hence we conclude, that pardon must spring peculiarly from the blood of the cross, and holiness be a separate work of the Spirit. But though all gracious [influences or feelings] are the Spirit's fruits, yet that fruit is bestowed at the foot of the cross; eternal life is found at Calvary by eating the Saviour's flesh and drinking his blood.

As he drew to the close of his letter, Berridge expressed his prayerful desire for his reader and family:

⁸ Berridge was referring to those who met at the Old Foundry, Moorfields, which was the headquarters of John Wesley's work.

May the Lord Jesus bring and keep you and yours at the cross, to see and sing the wonders of redeeming love, till you are called up higher to sing eternal praise with all the saints.⁹

And may God grant that this shall be the effect of this brief article on all who read it, on all who listen to my reading of it.

⁹ Pibworth: *Letters* pp197-201.