

## *To an Enquirer*

Before I turn to Berridge on this matter, let me quote two passages of Scripture which speak directly to the issue:

Christ was asked: ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’ He replied: ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent’ (John 6:28-29).

Paul and Silas were asked: ‘What must I do to be saved?’ They replied: ‘Believe [on] the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household’ (Acts 16:30-31).

Now for Berridge on this important matter. In all probability, he had received a letter from a man attending William Romaine’s ministry in London, a man described by Pibworth as ‘an unknown enquirer’. This man wanted Berridge’s help in coming to Christ, the place of works, and the question of assurance. Berridge replied to his correspondent in a letter dated 14th September 1773, opening thus: ‘I received your kind letter, and thank you for it’. Without preamble, he plunged straight in:

You want [need] nothing but an opened eye to see the glory of Christ’s redemption; and he must give it, and will bestow it, when it is most for his glory and your advantage.

Now, while it is true that God alone can give the sinner grace, that God alone can regenerate – give ‘an opened eye’ – and that the bestowal of that grace is at God’s sovereign pleasure and for his glory, and, yes, such a bestowal is to the eternal ‘advantage’ of the sinner, there is no scriptural support for the way Berridge was dealing with this unbeliever. The note sounded in Scripture is always the same: see the two passages with which I opened this chapter. And the principle can, and should be, extended: the call, the invitation, the command, the exhortation for the sinner to repent and trust Christ is

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always peremptory. That is, the sinner is addressed as one who is responsible for an immediate response, with no hint of any delay:

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other (Isa. 45:22).

Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’ (Mark 1:14-15).

Come to me [said Christ], all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28).

We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain... Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 5:20 – 6:2).

There is no hint of delay in any of this.

Moreover, the gospel invitation or command is to be issued with the assurance that all who do repent and believe will be saved. Berridge himself realised this, as he later said in the letter. Even so, he had left much to be desired in the way he had begun his reply.

Berridge went on, rightly destroying his correspondent’s reliance (if any) on any form of good works. Such graces, such works, Berridge made it perfectly clear, bring no merit whatsoever. In destroying the man’s trust in his works as a way of salvation, Berridge was rightly encouraging him to look directly to Christ and to Christ alone for salvation. Nevertheless, alas, he was still speaking in terms of delay:

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Had you Daniel's holiness, Paul's zeal, John's love, Magdalene's repentance<sup>1</sup> (and I wish you had them all), yet altogether they would give you no title to a pardon. You must at last receive it as a ruined sinner, even as the cross-thief received it.

Do not miss the 'at last'. In other words, Berridge was telling his correspondent to prepare himself for a delay. When, in Scripture, does any preacher speak in such terms? Never, that I know. But, of course, Berridge was right to let his correspondent know that in coming to Christ for salvation, he must come as 'a ruined sinner'. He went on in the same vein:

No graces or services of your own can give you a right to pardon; you must come to Jesus for it, weary and heavy laden [Matt. 11:28]; and if you are afflicted for sin, and desirous of being delivered from its guilt and power, no past iniquities in your life, nor present corruptions of your heart, will be a bar to pardoning mercy. If we are truly seeking salvation by Jesus, we shall be disposed, as we are really bound, to seek after holiness.

Notice how Berridge has introduced the concept of 'the seeking sinner'. This is a figment, dangerous at that.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Berridge was probably making the usual assumption that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Of this, there is not the slightest evidence.

<sup>2</sup> I hope to publish on this vital topic, seeing it is such a common fault in addresses to sinners. It plays into the dreadful notion – and it seems to be gaining ground by the growth of the New Perspective – that conversion happens by some sort of osmosis as part of a process and not a 'crisis'; that is, a confrontation with the Christ (see my *Conversion; Hinge*). (By 'crisis', I am not, of course, talking of the 'dramatic'). I am speaking about the way sinners are encouraged to attend – keep attending – church services, preaching services in particular, in the hope that one day they might be converted. Such a view is a direct consequence and curse of Constantinian-Christendom. We should not talk about 'seeking' as a process. Isa. 55:6 offers no support for the notion. 'Seek the LORD while he may be

Moreover, in speaking to an unconverted man about ‘seeking holiness’, Berridge was in danger of confusing the conversion of a sinner with the progressive sanctification of a saint. And thus he was in danger of encouraging the notion of salvation by works – the very thing that he was doing in his unregenerate days, and which he came to deplore so bitterly once he was converted.<sup>3</sup>

However, Berridge immediately set about correcting any tendency in his correspondent to mistake the two:

But remember, though holiness is the walk to heaven, Christ is the way to God; and when you seek for pardon, you must go wholly out of your walk, be it good or bad, and look only to him who is the way [John 14:6; Acts 4:12]. You must look to him as a miserable sinner, justly condemned by his law, a proper brand for hell, and look to be plucked from the fire by rich and sovereign grace [Jude 22]. You have as much worthiness for a pardon as the cross-thief had – which is none at all. And in your best estate [condition], you will never have any more. A pardon was freely given to him upon his asking for it freely, and given instantly because no room was left for delays; and a pardon is as ready for you as for him, when you can ask for it as he did, with self-loathing and condemnation; but...

I pause. It is here that Berridge does what I spoke of above – he allows for no delay, and gives his correspondent the biblical assurance that all who call upon Christ will be immediately saved. Even so, he undermined his own excellent counsel. How? By making the sinner think of himself. Do not miss his ‘When you can ask for it as [the thief] did, with self-loathing and condemnation’. In expressing himself thus, Berridge was

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found; call upon him while he is near’ is a command for immediate trust in Christ, not for the unbeliever to go on and on seeking, ‘waiting at the pool’ (John 5:1-9).

<sup>3</sup> See the Introduction and the chapter ‘Preaching’. See also Pibworth: *Letters* pp41-42,402.

making a common mistake. What? By turning gospel invitations into barriers, and making the sinner think of himself, when he should be looking away from himself, out of himself, and unto Christ.<sup>4</sup> One example must suffice. When Jesus invites the weary and heavy-laden (Matt. 11:28), the last thing the preacher should be doing is to make the sinner think about his weariness and so on – that is, am I weary, am I weary enough, am I sincerely weary? This approach, in effect, turns the invitation on its head. That which is intended to encourage every sinner to come to Christ is now made a fence which the sinner has to climb before he comes to Christ! Berridge, in adopting this course, was yet again inadvertently encouraging the sinner's delay, and removing the vital note of urgency.

And that is not all. Berridge returned to the subject of Christ's sovereignty. While he was right in what he said, he was once more encouraging the sinner to delay and hesitate. Indeed, he went on to encourage the enquirer to go on seeking and waiting, which, as I have said, is quite unbiblical:

But the proper seasons for bestowing the pardon are kept in Jesus' own hand. He makes his mercy manifest to the heart when it will most glorify his grace and benefit the sinner. Only continue asking for mercy, and seek it only through the blood of the cross, without any eye to your own worthiness, and [seek] that the blood in due time will be sprinkled on your conscience, and you shall cry: 'Abba, Father' [Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6].<sup>5</sup>

To show, as it were, the crookedness of Berridge's stick, let me lay down a straight one alongside, the second passage with which I opened this chapter. Compare Berridge's reply, with its encouragement to delay, to go on seeking, waiting until the enquirer's feelings were 'right', to that of Paul and Silas. When they were asked:

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<sup>4</sup> See my *Offer; Eternal; No Safety*.

<sup>5</sup> Pibworth: *Letters* pp207-208.

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‘What must I do to be saved?’, they replied at once: ‘Believe [on] the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved’ (Acts 16:30-31). In other words, the apostolic way was to drive sinners to look to Christ, and do so at once. We must do the same. We should not drive men to look at their feelings. Nor should we encourage delay. Urgent is the word! We should not talk about ‘seeking’ as a process.