

Assurance

Berridge had received a letter from a certain J.S., who had asked:

May I call Jesus mine, though I am not yet fully assured of an interest in him by the spirit [or Spirit?] of adoption?

It seems that J.S. wanted to be able to say that he was a true believer, even though he did not have the witness of the Spirit, he was not assured that he was converted. In other words, he wanted to know and be able to say that he had assurance.

In reply, in his letter of 20th September 1776, Berridge was unequivocal:

By the tenor of your letter, I think you not only may, but ought.

He gave his supporting argument:

Let Jesus Christ answer, and rebuke your unbelief in the following precious words: ‘Come unto me, all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’ [Matt. 11:28]. If J.S. is laden with the guilt and filth of sin, finding them a heavy burden, and is labouring to be delivered from that burden, and is coming on seeking to [*sic*] Christ *alone* for deliverance, then rest, blessed rest, heavenly rest, is promised to J.S., and J.S. may say with thankfulness: ‘Repentance is mine, faith is mine’.

Alas, this paragraph does not support Berridge’s confident assurance in answering the question J.S. asked. Matthew 11:28 does not address the subject of assurance; rather, it speaks of Christ’s invitation to sinners to trust him for salvation. Assurance is a consequence of that trust. As is evident from the way he went on, Berridge realised this.

But before I get to that, let me deal with Berridge's use of the text for its proper purpose – in calling a sinner to faith in Christ. Alas, he showed yet again the same tendency as he did in his letter 'To an Enquirer', which see; namely, he continued to stress the sinner's sense of guilt and weariness in such a way as to make the sinner dwell upon his qualification or fitness for trusting Christ. As I explained when looking at the letter to the 'enquirer', gospel invitations should not be used to make sinners look within, but, rather, to look to Christ, and to do so at once, fully confident that God will save all who call on Christ for salvation. The truth is, Berridge was still encouraging his correspondent to go on with the notion of 'the seeking sinner'.

Berridge tried to tease out the thinking behind the question J.S. had asked:

Satan, it seems, is whispering in your ear that believing before sealing is not faith, but presumption.

In saying this, Berridge was speaking of 'the seal of the Spirit', 'the witness of the Spirit'. Before we go any further, let me set out the scriptures which deal with this witness, sealing or anointing of the Spirit:

If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ... Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory... We... have the firstfruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:9,14-17,23).

Now it is God who... anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Cor. 1:21-22).

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God... has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Cor. 5:5).

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our [your] hearts, the Spirit who calls out: 'Abba, Father'. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir (Gal. 4:6-7).

You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory... Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30).

And then:

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth... As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him (1 John 2:20-27).

This is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us (1 John 3:24).

We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (1 John 4:13).

It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth... We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has

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given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:6,9-11).¹

So when Berridge said: ‘Satan, it seems, is whispering in your ear that believing before sealing is not faith, but presumption’, he recognised that J.S. was listening to the devil who was putting the cart before the horse. Berridge knew the scriptural antidote, and had his prescription ready for his correspondent:

Let Paul give the devil an answer: ‘*After* that you believed, you were sealed’ [Eph. 1:13]. This sealing does not make faith to be saving – it only *assures* a disciple that he is possessed of saving faith, and has a real interest in Christ.

Excellent! But the obvious point needs to be made: the Spirit will not – cannot! – seal the believer, will not witness to him, assuring him that he is a believer, and therefore united to Christ, *until he is a believer*. No unconverted sinner – an unbeliever – can have that seal, the assurance that he is converted, until he is converted!

Many hyper-Calvinists go wrong over this, marring the preaching of the gospel, and causing untold misery and anxiety for those who believe their teaching. They look for the assurance – the ‘manifestation’, as they term it – that they are elect (or justified, which in this case amounts to the same thing) before they can or will believe. Indeed, they look for this assurance about their hearers before they will invite or command *them* to believe. As a result, since nobody can have that assurance of another until they have given evident signs of saving faith, in order not to invite the non-elect, hyper-Calvinists never invite or command anybody to repent and believe.²

¹ In addition, we have the repeated experience of being ‘filled with the Spirit’ (Luke 1:15,41,67; 4:1; Acts 2:4; 4:8,31; 6:3,5; 9:17; 11:24; 13:52; Eph. 5:18).

² See my *Eternal; No Safety*.

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Berridge then offered J.S. comfort, but in so doing he further encouraged him to go on waiting and seeking:

And remember, though a sealed faith brings most comfort to a disciple, a waiting faith brings most glory to God.

I am at a loss to know what scriptures teach this. Berridge offered none.

Berridge went on, this time offering greater assurance to his correspondent:

I cannot doubt of your having the Spirit of Christ, because of your deep humiliation for sin, your hatred of sin, your desire for holiness, your seeking of Christ alone for pardon and justification, and your consolations from above.

If Berridge had used ‘trusting’ instead of ‘seeking’, he would have been much closer to Paul. What am I talking about? The apostle knew that the Thessalonians were elect, not because they were *seeking* Christ, but because they were *trusting* Christ – and, therefore, obeying him. I stress the ‘obedience’, not because it is the way the sinner is saved, not because it is the cause of his salvation, but because it is a clear – and essential – indication that the man truly is trusting the Saviour. Christ was unequivocal on this very point:

Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me... If anyone loves me, he will keep my word (John 14:21-23).

When I said ‘closer to Paul’, I was thinking of the way the apostle knew the Thessalonians were elect:

We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction... And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in

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Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:4-10).

Paul knew the Thessalonians were elect and converted because they believed and obeyed Christ in the gospel.

Berridge then set out what he understood by ‘the sealing of the Spirit’. Since J.S. had manifested such evidences – ‘your deep humiliation for sin, your hatred of sin, your desire for holiness, your seeking of Christ alone for pardon and justification, and your consolations from above’ – Berridge declared that he (J.S.) could be sure that:

...these are evident tokens of the Spirit’s indwelling, and the seal will be given when it is most for God’s glory, and your welfare, and though it should not be impressed till the twelfth hour, be not discouraged, but pray for it, and expect it, and by waiting patiently for the blessing while it is delayed, you give glory to God.

In saying this, Berridge was speaking in terms unknown in Scripture. We have no record of any believer seeking the witness and seal of the Spirit. The many scriptural passages I quoted earlier show beyond a shadow of a doubt that every believer – every believer – is given the witness of the Spirit at conversion. The idea of a delay, a sense of struggle for such a witness, though commonly taught and believed, is foreign to Scripture, and alas, it has been the cause of much prolonged misery – not to say protracted agony – for countless believers. Sad to say, ever since the Puritans, the evangelical world has largely bought into their legal way of assurance. Many today, utterly unaware of their dependence on the Puritans, are in this legal bondage, and have no concept of biblical

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teaching on the witness of the Spirit. As a result, they are poring over their evidences of progressive sanctification for the meagre assurance they ‘enjoy’, when, all the time, they should be looking to Christ and what he is and has done for them.³

Berridge concluded the thrust of his letter to his correspondent thus:

You are blessed with that brokenness of heart, which is God’s gift, and with which he has promised to dwell. And that broken spirit will carry you safe over Jordan.⁴

The truth is, Berridge should have told J.S. to listen to the Spirit taking him to Christ, showing him the glory of his Saviour, and what he (J.S.) was and had in Jesus, and told him to turn a deaf ear to Satan and to the traditional teaching of men which was only leading him into doubt, bondage and sorrow.

In a letter to Mrs Hillier, 10th April 1778, Berridge wrote about looking in the wrong place for assurance; namely, one’s feelings. As Edward Mote put it:

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.*

It is no use trusting feelings. We must lean entirely on Christ’s name; that is, his person, work and offices.

And Berridge was persuaded that depending on feelings leads to trouble:

Good frames [feelings] are desirable things, and to be sought after, yet we are apt to judge of ourselves too much from our frames, and too little from the word of

³ Of course, as I have indicated, the believer’s progressive sanctification – ‘evidences’ – are essential, and act as a secondary support for his assurance. See my *Assurance*.

⁴ Pibworth: *Letters* pp262-264, emphasis original.

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God. When the heart is heavy and cold, we conclude hastily there is no spiritual life and no love of Christ in the heart, and are ready to give up all hope.

Even in such low circumstances, however, Berridge could still offer hope:

But in your worst frames, are those frames not a burden? This is a proof [that] you have some life: for the dead feel nothing. Again, in your heaviest frames, is not the absence of Christ a trouble? Do you not desire his presence, indeed prefer it before any other joy? Well, this desire of Christ's presence is a *sure* indication of love towards Christ. For we never desire anyone's company, at least not much of his company, unless we love him. Why is a wife heavy and sorrowful during her husband's absence upon a long journey? It is because she loves him. Yet perhaps her love to his person is so overwhelmed with sorrow for his absence that she may overlook her own love, whilst only attentive to her own sorrow. This is often the case with believers, who overlook their love for Jesus, whilst sorrowing for his absence. Yet a moment's recollection would assure them [that] they could not sorrow for Jesus except they loved him.

On this basis, Berridge offered Mrs Hillier some practical pastoral advice:

Well then, in your next heavy frame, when Lady Mistrust is got to your elbow, and whispers in your ear [that] there is no love in your heart for Jesus, pray, ask her Ladyship: 'Why then does my heart pine after Jesus? We cannot desire what we hate, but what we love'. Stick to this answer, and it will send her Ladyship packing. But if she desires a salute at parting, as perhaps she may, for she is an impudent baggage [an artful madam], turn away your face, and tell her [that] you could have no desire for Jesus unless he had first a desire for you [1 John 4:19], and the desires of his heart, proceeding from love, are unchangeable. The Lord

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make you thankful, exceedingly thankful, for what you have received, and then press on for further blessings.⁵

Berridge returned to the theme in another letter to Mrs Hillier, written on 29th June 1781, in which he spoke of mourning for an absent God – that is, longing to feel the presence of God within – as a sure sign of spiritual life:

Could you mourn for the favour of God, unless his favour had taught you to mourn? If he had not looked upon you in love, you had been as regardless of his favour as other fluttering, slanting damsels in London.⁶ But you desire a *sense* of his favour, a communication of his love. And you do well. Now the very desire of a communication of God's love is a proof that you love God; for we do not desire what we hate, but what we love. And you could not love God unless he had loved you first [1 John 4:19].⁷

He went on:

Suppose you had never felt a direct intimation of God's love by his Spirit, yet whilst you are mourning and praying for a sense of this love, Jesus Christ declares you are one of God's blessed ones, for 'blessed are they that mourn' [Matt. 5:4]... The hatred God has given you of sin, with a fervent desire after [for] holiness, a whole reliance on Christ for salvation, are a loud and abiding witness of your heavenly birth. And they, who are born from above, shall never die eternally. Come then, my dear Madam, lift up your heart.⁸

But I am afraid Berridge was basing this on a misunderstanding. Matthew 5:4 does not speak of sinners hungering after salvation, longing to be saved – even

⁵ Pibworth: *Letters* pp275-276, emphasis original.

⁶ By his 'fluttering, slanting damsels in London', Berridge was referring to the carnal, silly ladies who frequented fashionable society in the capital.

⁷ There is a risk in stressing this. It encourages the view that negative signs – feeling wretched and so on – are marks of the highest spirituality.

⁸ Pibworth: *Letters* pp306-307, emphasis original.

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though this is commonly thought to be the meaning of Christ's words. Rather, Christ's promise refers to believers who long to be more Christ-like. Those who long to grow in grace will do so.

In a letter to an unnamed correspondent, 7th November 1786, Berridge assured his reader:

I have hitherto found that Christian people who live in the dark, fearing and doubting, yet waiting upon God, usually have a very happy death. They are kept humble, hungering and praying, and the Lord clears up their evidences at length in a last sickness, if not before, and they go off with hallelujahs.

All this chimes in with my own experience and observation of hyper-Calvinists, especially those belonging to the Gospel Standard Strict Baptists. Much of what Berridge described in this paragraph fits them like a glove. No doubt the same could be said of many others.

But Berridge should have been more forthright here. Instead of going along with the pseudo-spiritual talk, he should have done as Scripture always does, and direct the believer to listen to the Spirit and look to Christ. Alas, however, Berridge went on in the same vein, virtually encouraging bondage to fear:

From what I know of you, and from the account you give of yourself, I have no doubt of the safety of your state. Yet rest not here, but seek further.

I know of no scriptural support for 'seeking assurance'. Matthew 7:7-11 does not fit the bill.⁹

But Berridge then got onto firmer ground:

Two things should be carefully attended to by all upright people – one is the evidence of the word; the other is the evidence or witness of the Spirit.

⁹ See my forthcoming book on the subject of 'seeking'.

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He spoke first of ‘the evidence of the word’:

The word says: ‘All that believe are justified from all things’ [Acts 13:39]. I ask, then, do you not place your whole dependence on Jesus Christ for salvation? Do you not heartily accept... Jesus Christ in all his offices? And are you not daily seeking... him to teach you and rule you, as well as to pardon you? Then you are certainly a believer, and as such are justified in God’s sight from all your sins, according to the plain declaration of God’s word. Let this encourage you...

Berridge then moved to ‘the evidence of the Spirit’. ‘Let this’ – the evidence of the word – ‘encourage you’:

...to seek with confidence for the evidence [or witness] of the Spirit, to proclaim that justification to your heart. The evidence of the word is given to hold up the heart in a season of doubts and fears, and the evidence [the witness] of the Spirit comes to scatter those fears.

Berridge was right to speak of the witness of both the word and the Spirit. The sinner, coming to Christ, by the Spirit’s power believes the word – he trusts the promise of Christ in the word, he trusts the person of Christ revealed in the word, and he obeys the command of Christ in the word (John 12:44-50; 14:21,23-24) – and thus, in trusting Christ, he is given the witness of the Spirit, the one who continues to take him to Christ and to show him his Saviour’s grace, glory and preciousness. In other words, the Spirit bears witness to the believer, speaking to him of his position in Christ; that is, his justification and positional sanctification in Jesus.

But Berridge was repeating his usual mistake – encouraging his correspondent to seek the witness of the Spirit. As I keep saying, although it is commonly taught and believed, it lacks any scriptural support. And, as such, has very serious consequences for the believer who is gripped by it.

Berridge concluded his point:

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Remember also that salvation does not depend on the *strength* of faith, but the *reality* of it. In the Gospels, Jesus often rebukes weak faith, but never rejects it. Weak faith brings but little comfort, yet it is as much entitled to salvation¹⁰ as strong.¹¹

With my proviso over ‘entitled’, yes, this is true. Nevertheless, in Scripture, believers are always called to be strong in faith (Rom. 4:18-25; 11:1-40; 12:1-3), and are never encouraged to languish for years in the shallows of doubt and misery.¹² Of course, the New Testament saints knew sufferings and trials, but their joy was unbounded. One passage must suffice:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:3-9).

¹⁰ ‘Entitled’ is wrong. Faith is the means of receiving salvation.

¹¹ Pibworth: *Letters* pp369-370, emphasis original.

¹² Rom. 7:14-25 does not justify the claim that the highest Christian life is to feel oneself wretched.