

Pride

In a letter to John Newton, written 18th October 1771, Berridge spoke of the sin of pride, and did so in no uncertain terms:

The foulest stain, and highest absurdity in our nature is pride, and yet this base hedgehog so rolls himself up in his bristly coat that we can seldom get a sight of his claws. It is the root of unbelief. Men cannot submit to the righteousness of Christ. It [pride] cleaves like a pitched shirt [that is, one soaked in tar] to the skin, or like leprosy to the wall. No sharp culture of ploughing and harrowing will clear the ground of it. The foul twitch¹ will be sure to spring up with the next kindly rain.

Let me underline the force of Berridge's words. Through pride, the unbeliever will not – cannot – submit to Christ's righteousness. He must, he feels, be able to contribute something of his own to ensure his salvation. 'Nothing in my hand I bring', is just about the hardest thing for the unbeliever to say; above all, to feel. Only the grace of God, by the Spirit, can break this dreadful sin of pride. But – and this is the piercing thought – even once he is converted, the believer still experiences pride's besetting power. What believer does not know and feel it?

Berridge turned to his own experience:

This diabolical sin has brought more scourges on my back than everything else, and it is of so insinuating a nature that I know not how to part with it. I hate it, and love it. I quarrel with it, and embrace it. I dread it, and yet suffer [allow] it to lie in my bosom. It pleads a right,

¹ Pibworth: 'Couch grass, [which] before the days of chemicals... was very difficult to eliminate in sandy soil since any small piece remaining in the ground grew back again'.

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through the fall, to be a tenant for life, and has such a wonderful appetite that it can feed kindly both on grace and garbage, [it] will be as warm and snug in a cloister as a palace, and be as much delighted with a fine prayer as a foul oath.

Nevertheless – and Berridge here exposes the insinuating and all-pervasive power of pride – even as he was going into all this, he had to acknowledge that pride was lurking at the bottom of what he was saying, even as he was declaiming so fervently and honestly against it:

But whither am I running? Why, running into pride, whilst I am abusing it. Lord, save me! If it must dwell with me, let it not be a lordly master, but a loathed domestic [a despised necessity that I can, at least to a measure, control]; if it will follow me here, like my shadow, let it not entail a curse upon me. Oh, that I could once say unto you, foul pride: ‘Farewell forever’.²

In a letter to John Thornton 21st September 1775, Berridge wrote again about the sin of pride, its insidious nature, its chameleon-like quality:

[There is no] Christian grace on earth, but pride will creep into the bosom, and mix with it as freely as oil with oil. Nor is Lady Pride ever so delighted as when she becomes intimate with humility, and by soft caresses and bland speeches, encourages the sweet damsel to think highly of herself, even when she looks and talks humbly. No religious act can I do but pride is skulking at my elbow, and much affecting me both by her smiles and frowns. If I chance to pray or preach with a gale [that is, heartily, with liberty], she tickles up vanity,³ and when I am becalmed she stirs up fretfulness. One while [moment] she whispers and tells me I am a fine fellow, and then I am cheery [elated]. By and by, she calls me a fool, and then I am sullen. A

² Pibworth: *Letters* pp175-176.

³ I read somewhere that a woman congratulated John Bunyan: ‘That was a sweet sermon, Mr Bunyan’. ‘I know’, he replied. ‘The devil told me before I left the pulpit’.

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weeping audience [to my preaching] stirs up my pride, and so does a sleepy one. I am full as lofty when creeping ashamed from my pulpit with my head hanging down, as when I come away brisk with a feather in my cap. Indeed, Sir, this pride besieges my heart, besets all my steps, and meets me at every hedge corner. It has more heads than the Nile, and more shapes than Proteus,⁴ and every week I discover some new prints of its foot. Henceforth if you ask my real name, it is Pride. And such an odd mysterious evil is it, I can even be proud of loathing my pride.

Berridge went on to explain how he had been moved to write in such a vein. He had lived for sixty years without thanking God for his teeth, he confessed, but a few days before writing he lost an upper front tooth. He went on:

Well, Sir, ever since my tooth came out, pride and I have been laying our heads together, how to remedy this evil.

He then went into detail of how pride made him insist on finding a way to please and excuse his vanity, when he knew all the while that he was only displaying what ‘a sad fool’ he was.⁵

Pride! Though Berridge hated the sin – especially in himself – he never tired of exposing its odiousness.⁶

⁴ A mythical figure who could assume a different shape at will.

⁵ Pibworth: *Letters* pp246-247.

⁶ See ‘Pride’ in the index (Pibworth: *Letters* p473).