

Spiritual Freedom

Excerpted from a sermon on “Faith and Human Freedom”
by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

And many more believed because of His own word. Then they said to the woman, “Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4:41,42).

“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

Our freedom is limited in all sorts of ways and at different times of our lives. A child grows up under authority and learns to take directions. He also learns his parents’ ideas of morality and his parents’ religion. He has to obey the rules of a school, of the town in which he lives, of his country. All these things limit a person’s freedom to do what he wants.

Rational society knows that some freedoms should not be given to us. To break the laws of the country should be forbidden unless they are totally and spiritually unjust. We should be bound by social law as well. Society has a right to punish people who show no care for its members in moral matters (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4167; *et al.*).

Some freedoms we should work for and even fight for. The freedom to worship, to speak the truth, to act *from* conscience, to live where you may make a living—all these things should be guarded by a government which deserves to survive. For these freedoms are part of human longing. They can be smothered for a while, but the human soul yearns for them and will go on looking for them through any oppression.

And one freedom is so important that it is in the hands of the Lord Himself. He won’t let anyone take it away for more than a while. It is the liberty to believe what you want to believe and to love what you want to love. That spiritual freedom is deep within the heart of everyone. It can hide where no person can ever go, and it can be protected even when terrible pressures are being put on us to give it up. The Lord holds as *inviolable* the principle that every human being is free to choose his or her belief, and to cherish his or her chosen loves. You can deny someone the free *expression* of belief or love, but not the secret, private conviction and enjoyment of them (see *Divine Providence* 129; *Arcana Coelestia* 5854; *et al.*).

In the long run no one can deny us this freedom, but it can be muted and delayed and interfered with over a period of years. A person who is sick is not in full freedom, because the private enjoyments of life are denied him, and he may be afraid of death. A person acting under strong fear is not truly free; the fear makes him think differently from the way he might otherwise think. Someone who is mentally ill may have his spiritual freedom impaired for a long time.

Other pressures can also limit spiritual freedom. Some countries teach their people that disagreeing with the rulers is a crime, and often succeed in limiting free thought (see *True Christian Religion* 814; *Spiritual Experiences M.* 4772). Society can do this as well; if people are made to feel that merely to express a differing opinion is sinful, they will be pressured into the more “acceptable” modes of thought. A church can be just as bad if it limits the understanding of truth to what the leaders of the church teach. Anyone in the church can do it too—if you express

an idea and someone looks at you with surprise and faint distaste because the idea is “not what the church teaches,” you may feel pressured to relinquish your idea in favor of one that will make you less unpopular.

It’s amazing how deeply the people around us can affect our enjoyment of the *most* precious freedom there is—the one the Lord guards secretly in our minds so that no one can destroy it forever. It can’t die, but it can be held ransom for months or years, and bits of it can be limited so that we have to wait, maybe until the next life, to feel true spiritual freedom.

The Lord has given the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church to restore that freedom, to establish it at the highest level possible. In His order there is nothing more important, because unless we can turn to Him in freedom, we can’t turn to Him at all. The freedom to choose our loves and our beliefs is so important that He Himself never forces anyone. In fact, He says that if He were to force someone to love what is good, that person “would come into such torment and into such a hell that he could not possibly endure it, for he would be miserably deprived of his life” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5854).

The Heavenly Doctrine establishes and uplifts this freedom in several ways. First, it is given to take away human authority, to cut through the dogmas or the customs of any organization—even of the church that acknowledges it! It was given to enable people to look not to the learned and the outspoken and the eloquent for guidance, but to the Lord Himself for leadership in all spiritual things. It was given to provide personal, private, and therefore totally free, contact with the Lord and His truth. “If you abide in My Word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32).

This last revelation by the Lord is quite different from all those which went before, even though it agrees with them in every point. It is different in its appeal. First of all, it is complete. It talks about all matters of human life, in terms that people can understand. The Old and New Testaments touch on all parts of human life, too, but often so briefly that people have not understood them. The Heavenly Doctrine is a comprehensive, consistent and completely presented description of the Lord’s laws.

It is not just comprehensive. It also has depth. It talks about things that we could never know without the Lord’s telling us. It tells us about the life after death and the spiritual nature of the life we will live there. It tells us secrets about human life here—how, for example, the bond of marriage spiritually changes a young man and woman and prepares them for total love. It tells of the thousands of secret things the Lord is doing when He rebuilds the human heart that turns to Him. Inside of His new revelation there is a depth that will never be plumbed. We will go on learning its secrets for tens of thousands of years and never grow tired of them.

The Heavenly Doctrine appeals to that human understanding which longs for truth and goodness. It touches the part of us which wants to see the truth for itself. The Heavenly Doctrine isn’t written in the form of commands. It sets out our obligations, and it most certainly tells us what is forbidden. But its whole approach is to ask us to consider what is said and see if it is true, and only embrace it when we see it. “What the spirit is convinced of,” it says, “is allotted a higher place in the mind than that which enters from authority and the faith of authority without any consultation of the reason” (*Conjugal Love* 295). And again it says,

Real faith is nothing else than an acknowledgment that the thing is so because it is true; for one who is in real faith thinks and says, "This is true and therefore I believe it...." If such a person does not see the truth of a thing, he says, "I do not know whether this is true, and therefore as yet I do not believe it. How can I believe what I do not comprehend with the understanding? Perhaps it is false" (Doctrine of Faith 2).

It is nonsense to say that we should believe without understanding. The Lord has given us the power to see His truth. "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." The freedom to look at truth for ourselves and see it for ourselves, the freedom to find joy in discovering that what He has said is true—the Lord offers us this by telling us of His truth and by doing so quietly, without threatening us or appealing to anything but our love of the truth.

But this can be done only if it is the Lord Himself who reveals these truths. If a brilliant person were to reveal new truths, even if that person had seen them out of heaven, they would have a limitation. They would be limited by his understanding. They might enlighten, but they could not give true freedom. The reason is that you would be believing the truth on the basis of his understanding and his awareness. This is the faith of authority. Only an explanation of truth which comes directly from the Lord Himself can truly open the mind and free it. For the Lord reveals truth in perfect form. It is unsullied by human adjustment and interpretation. It is from His mouth, and there is no fault in the expression. Therefore when we have faith in it we have faith in something pure which our minds can explore in total freedom.

This is the quality of the truth in the Word of the Lord. It is truth which is open all the way to the Lord Himself. It is couched in human language, and comes apparently through the prophets, through the apostles, through Emanuel Swedenborg. But the truth itself comes from the Lord Jesus Christ, and He is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:5).

Amen.

Lessons: John 4:19-30, 39-42; John 8:30-47; *Doctrine of Faith* 2, 3