

FOUR KINDS OF FREEDOM

by the Rev. Dan Goodenough

Everyone longs to be free. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us this¹, and inside ourselves we know it is true. Today, perhaps more than ever, people are arguing about freedom, and in some countries they are even making war over freedom.

Freedom is so important because it lies at the very heart of everyone's life. Human beings have always struggled for freedom, and with good reason. But they usually haven't understood what freedom really is, or how you get it. Too often, people have fought only for the freedom to do what they wanted, without understanding that the really basic freedom is something spiritual that comes from God.

In the New Church, the Lord makes all things new, and the Heavenly Doctrine gives us a new understanding of freedom that can help us to become truly free. In fact, the Heavenly Doctrine says so much about freedom that I can only summarize teachings about four kinds of freedom.

Free Will

The first and most basic kind of freedom is the Lord's gift of free will, or liberty. This is something He gives to all human beings. In fact, it is what makes us human.² Everyone is given the ability by the Lord to choose freely between good and evil, right and wrong. You can love and think what is good or what is evil. Even if you can't do and say everything you think and will (or love), still no one can make you love something you don't wish to. We are even free to love and think the most awful, terrible things. We can choose to go to hell if we want to.

This freedom to will or love as we wish, is the real reason we live forever, in heaven or hell. Animals do not have free will, but all humans have something of it. Even infants and small children have the beginning of freedom, and can choose, in limited ways, to do good or bad, depending on their maturity. The Lord gradually gives children and young people more free will as they mature and take responsibility. But it is only as adults that we are fully free to choose for ourselves whether we will love the goods of heaven or the evils of hell.

Many people today don't believe in this freedom. Some think God decides everything, including whether a person goes to heaven or hell. This is called predestination. Others believe you become only what your environment, education and experiences make you, as though we were slaves to all the things that happen to us.

But the Lord is love, and because He loves us He wants us to feel as full of life as possible. And we can only feel that life is our own if we are free—free to love good or evil. So the most important freedom of all is the freedom of our spirit to love and think the way we want to. In that freedom lies the very secret of all human life.

Heavenly Freedom

People use their free will to love all different kinds of things, good and bad. If throughout your life you use your free will to love what is good, and to turn away from evil, the Lord gives you “heavenly freedom”.³ This is the freedom the angels have, and it is called “freedom itself” because there is nothing you can’t do. That is because everything you want is good and useful for others. No one stops you from doing these good things. In fact, everywhere you go you are encouraged to do what you want, because your life is to love others. This beautiful freedom comes only from a lifetime of seeking to live the Lord’s way.

Hellish Freedom

A third kind of freedom is “infernal” freedom, and it is the freedom you get in hell.⁴ In hell, you can still go on loving and thinking the way you want to, but everywhere you turn, you are limited and hemmed in by various punishments and obstacles. Why? Because just about everything you want works against somebody else. And since you aren’t allowed to damage other people (not even other evil spirits), you are constantly being frustrated by your own selfish loves. Hellish freedom is really slavery because you always want what you can’t have. It’s like being in a closed-in box you have built up around yourself, out of your own selfishness. Yet you are still you, free to *want* and *think* the way you choose. You get hellish freedom (rather than heavenly) by spending your life on earth trying to please yourself and make yourself happy, rather than working to make other people happy.

Freedom is the Lord’s most wonderful gift. Even though people often use it badly, He goes right on keeping us free, trying always to lift us out of “hellish freedom” and into “heavenly freedom.”

Freedom of Action

A fourth kind of freedom is the freedom to do and speak, freedom of action in the world. This freedom comes from the Lord, but it is limited (and should be) by conditions in the world.⁵ We are not as free to say and do, as we are free to will and think. There especially have to be limits on speaking and doing evil in the world. Otherwise evil people would constantly be doing terrible things to innocent victims. The purpose of governments and authority is to keep the freedom to do evil within definite limits. Yet we always have some freedom of action. And even when we are not free to do and say everything we want, we are still free in our spirit to will and to think the way we want to. The first kind of freedom, free will, always remains with us because it is a direct gift from the Lord.

Freedom and Order

It is important to know that freedom always goes together with order. Unfortunately, many people today think that order is against freedom, and that the only way to be free is to somehow get away from what is orderly. You can see how the mistake in this idea by remembering some really disorderly, wild school or family situation, when everyone was being “free” to yell or fight or do anything. Maybe you *felt* free for a little while, but if someone didn’t bring some order back into the situation then, in the long run, no one was really free to get anything done at all.

In fact, the purpose of order is to lead us into greater and greater freedom. “Order” that stifles all human freedom (as in some countries) is really disorder. And freedom, which is only possible in a framework of order, has the purpose of leading us into more and more order, and so into more and more freedom and happiness. Freedom and order make a kind of spiral: order makes us freer, and freedom allows us to come into a higher and more enjoyable order.

Growing into Freedom

As you get older the Lord gradually will give you more and more free will by keeping your mind in an orderly balance. The best way to prepare for adult freedom of will is to learn not to just follow the crowd, but to follow what you know is right and good. Learn to listen to the Lord in His Word, because it is by means of His truth that the Lord can give you the greatest possible freedom.⁶ Learn to think for yourself, using the true ideas you find in the Word. Listen to the wisdom of other people, and learn to think about it seriously, even when you don’t like it at first.

Especially find ways to stay out of trouble, and to turn away from what you know is wrong. Spend some time by yourself, and think about how you can do good things for other people rather than just finding ways to make yourself happy. Learn the difference between good advice that will help you and bad advice you should say no to. “You shall not follow a crowd to do evil,”⁷ the Lord says, and this is really a direction to increase your freedom. The sooner you learn to think and will for yourself, using the truths of the Word, the sooner the Lord will give you the free will of adulthood, and the happier He will make you.

¹ See *Divine Providence* 148

² See *True Christian Religion* 463-508, especially 475-482

³ See *Divine Providence* 43, 97-99

⁴ See *Divine Providence* 43, 97, 149

⁵ See *True Christian Religion* 498; *Divine Providence* 281

⁶ John 8:32

⁷ Exodus 23:2