

Free Will And Freedom **(the one is the starting point for the other)**

In a series of spot radio commentaries on the subject of Freedom, Leighton Ford, once recounted the experiences of Dr. Victor Frankl, who was imprisoned by the Nazis during the war. Whilst his captors could, and did, take away so much from him there was one thing they couldn't take away and that was his ability to choose his attitudes. They might rob him of his possessions, take away his sense of dignity, regiment his life and routine, but always he kept his ability to choose what his thoughts and attitudes were going to be.

This greatly interested me at the time I heard this, because I had been reading a book in which reference is made to the views of certain behavioural scientists who, surprisingly, rule out the individual's ability to make free choices where thoughts and attitudes and courses of action are concerned, arguing and believing that we are what we are and that we become what we become as the result of heredity and environment only. Our heredity and environment mould and make us, they say. Individual choice and free decision making really doesn't enter into it. What choices we make are governed by heredity and environment anyway.

Clearly two very different views of man are highlighted here. On the one hand, the proposition that despite everything, and take away from him all else, there is one thing that no one can take from another and that is his freedom to choose. On the other hand there are those who would have it that we are the outcome of what heredity and environment have made us. Truly independent choice hasn't entered into it. Though a person chooses, it is within the limits of the impact of the influence which heredity and environment has on him. He doesn't rise above these things or step outside them.

Not only do we have here two very different views of man. They involve sharply contrasting positions where personal responsibility is concerned. If man has the ability to choose what his attitudes are going to be then he is responsible for what those attitudes are. He becomes, in other words, what he himself has chosen to become. If, however, he is but the product of his heredity and environment then we do not blame him, or hold him responsible for what he becomes. He is a product of circumstances. His attitudes are a product of circumstances.

So then a question arises. Is man a free agent where the choice of his attitudes is concerned, or not? Has he the ability, through the choices he makes, to determine what he becomes?

The Christian position is very much one which regards man as a free agent with the capacity to choose to respond to teachings and values; to accept or reject them. Throughout the Scriptures, as much as His own teaching while on earth as in the Old Testament Scriptures, the Lord appeals to man and pleads with him for his cooperation. And, clearly, he is responsible for the measure of his cooperation, or lack of it. There is no question but that man is regarded there as a free agent. He can choose what he becomes, loving or unloving, selfish or unselfish, someone ready to sacrifice his own desires and wishes for the sake of others, or not. And he carries the responsibility for it at the end of it all. One cannot possibly read the Bible or, in particular, and as an example, the Sermon on the Mount, without seeing in it an appeal to man who is acknowledged to have the freedom to accept or reject what is being said. He can choose, he can determine, he can decide, what his attitudes are going to be. These are not predetermined. Man is not merely the product of his heredity and environment.

This is clear teaching of the Scriptures. It is taken up, reinforced and elaborated upon at length in the teaching given in Swedenborg's writings to which I now turn. A few brief quotations will help introduce the teaching of those Writings on the subject.

"One law of order in the government of the universe by the Lord" wrote Swedenborg, "is that Freedom is left to everybody; for without Freedom there is no life, nor any worship; and without Freedom there is no amendment." (*The Spiritual Diary* 2365). Again, "Man is held in the freedom to choose, that is, to receive what is good and true from the Lord, or to receive what is evil and false from hell." (*The Apocalypse Explained* 349). And, as is stressed, the freedom referred to, this capacity we all have to choose what are going to be our attitudes; whether we are going to give way to baser thoughts and inclinations, and so on; is from the Lord. It is the Lord's gift for us. It makes one with the whole mechanism of life and with the way it reaches us from Him. Life is so structured that during our life in this world we are, as to our thoughts and feelings, and with regard to the impulses which move us, midway between heaven, and heavenly influences, on the one hand, and hell, and hellish influences, on the other.

Neither is allowed by the Lord to exercise any undue magnetism or attraction over us, such as to destroy a free decision on our part. When the influences on one side are stirred up, influences from the other are awakened to counter balance these and we, in the middle, are free to choose which to respond to.

We all know how it is that when we are all set to forgive someone, thoughts come to us suggesting they don't deserve our forgiveness, and we must decide. In another situation we may be wrongly credited for something done by another, and our conscience starts pricking us. Do we point to the mistake? That's a decision we must make. That's a decision we can make. And we are quite able to step outside the impact of our heredity and environment to do so. I repeat the point: life is so structured that we are in freedom and can choose. We are responsible for what we become. Much as we might like to, we can't blame it on someone else or on matters of heredity and environment as if they were all that is involved.

"So long as he lives in the world, man is kept in the middle between heaven and hell, and therein in spiritual equilibrium, which is free will." (*True Christian Religion* 475). And this free will, from which is his capacity to choose and make free decisions, is guarded by the Lord in man "unimpaired and as sacred, in all the progressions of His Divine Providence." (*Divine Providence* 96). Without it there would be no real individuality. Man could not be brought to reformation and regeneration. The whole point and purpose of creation would be defeated. The Lord created the human race in order that He might enter into a reciprocal conjunction with we individuals who comprise it. However, reciprocity demands that man be free to choose to enter that conjunction or relationship, as of himself.

Two things are usefully noted here.

We have just seen how it is that in order to achieve His objective in creating the universe the Lord created man so that he is in spiritual equilibrium and has the capacity to choose. We know only too well that we do not always have the opportunity to do as we please. We are free to choose what our attitudes will be. They can be either good or bad, selfish or unselfish, heavenly or hellish. We choose. This is what freedom is all about. And even though the exercise of that freedom may lead to disorder in thought and intention, hell in the mind and hell in the body and in action, the Lord, of necessity, permits this. He permits it not because He wills it; not because He wants to see people suffering and hurt; not because, at least in theory, He can't do anything about it; but because to do anything about it; to suspend freedom; to openly cut across the free decisions people make; would be a greater tragedy than anything we can imagine.

God is not responsible for evil. But He permits evil. He does everything possible to prevent evil breaking out. But He will not over ride our freedom if that is the only way to prevent it breaking out.

The second thing I wanted to mention was this. Man has freewill because he is (as to his mind or spirit) held midway between heaven and hell. Each influences him in equal measure. Neither is permitted to press too heavily upon him. However, imagine a situation where the influences of hell did begin to press too heavily and the influences from heaven were too weak to counterbalance them. Imagine a situation where unwittingly, as it were, man was going forward into evil; doing evil not because he had freely chosen to do it but because the currents reaching him from hell had begun to sweep him along. This is the situation which developed in the period prior to the Lord's Coming on earth. This is why He needed to come. He needed to restore spiritual freedom; to set the balance right again; to give man back the opportunity to choose what he would become. This is why He took on human nature so that He could meet the power of hell face to face and overcome it. He restored the structure within the context life is received by us and as the result we are in equilibrium and have the capacity to choose.

Throughout the talk we have spoken of freedom and free will as if the words are interchangeable and mean the same thing. In a sense they do. Man is in freedom to choose. Man has freedom and it is something the Lord guards and preserves with him. Man is a free agent where choice of thoughts, attitudes and affections are concerned. He has free will.

However, at the same time, and looked at from a different viewpoint, they are different. Yes, man is in free will. But the freewill we speak of is in reality only the starting point of true freedom. The Lord said "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free". (John 8:32). He was making the point that before regeneration; before we come to know and receive and love the Divine Truth of the Word; we are not free at all. We are not in freedom. We are slaves. We are slaves of our lower natures and appetites. As he also went on to say, "Whosoever commits sin is the servant of sin". It is when we are no longer being dictated to by our selfishness and selfish outlook on life that we come into true freedom. We are in free will, but that situation of free will is our starting point from which we are able, if we so make up our minds, and choose, to come into a state of true freedom.

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