

Faith And Human Freedom

A Sermon by Rev. Peter M. Buss

"And many more believed because of His own word; and they said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of your saying: for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world" (John 4:41, 42).

"Ye 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 orders. He also learns his parents' ideas of morality and his parents' religion. He has to obey the rules of the school, of the town in which he lives, of his country. He is taught to look up to and obey those in higher positions than he, and he comes to have a feeling for the authority of man and the power of certain persons. He feels the press of social law -- doing what society expects of him. All these things limit his 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 AC 4167 et al).

Some freedoms we should work for and even fight for. We have made a history of doing so, and we have to wish well to all people who are trying to do so throughout the world. 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 man, and 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 inviolate 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 DP 129, AC 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 free: the fear makes him think differently from the way he might otherwise think. Someone who is mentally ill may find his spiritual freedom impaired for a long time.

There are also pressures that can limit it. Some countries, for example, teach their people that disagreeing with the rulers is a crime, and often succeed in limiting free thought (see TCR 814, SD Minor 4772). Society can do that 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 Writings 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 were He 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" (AC 5854).

The Writings establish and uplift this freedom in several ways. First, they are given to take away the authority of man, to cut through the dogmas or the customs of any organization -- even of the church that acknowledges them! They were 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. They were given to provide personal, private, and therefore totally free, contact with the Lord and His truth. "If ye abide in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

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, but often so briefly that people have not understood them. The Writings are a comprehensive, consistent and completely presented description of the Lord's laws.

They are not just comprehensive. They also have depth. They talk about things that we could never know without the Lord's telling us. They tell us about the life after death and the spiritual nature of the life we will live there. They tell 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. They tell 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.

They appeal to that human understanding which longs for truth and goodness. They touch the part of us which wants to see the truth for itself. The Writings aren't written in the form of commands. They set out our obligations, and they most certainly tell us what is forbidden. But their 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," they say, "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" (CL 295). And again they say, "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" (Faith 2). It is nonsense to say that we should believe without understanding. The Lord has given us the power to see His truth. "Ye 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 doing so quietly, without persuasiveness, without threatening us or appealing to anything but our love of the truth.

This can be done only if it is the Lord Himself who reveals these truths. If a brilliant man explains the truth, even if he is enlightened by the Lord Himself, then he can give insights into the truth, but he can't give freedom! The reason is simple -- you are believing the truth on the basis of his understanding and his awareness, and so it is the faith of authority. If the Writings were the work of the most brilliant man who ever lived, they couldn't make us free. Even if they were the Lord's revelation to Swedenborg, which he then told us about, our faith in them would be a trust in a man's understanding of what the Lord showed him. It would be a faith in the authority of some man, and that is limited. Only an explanation of truth which comes directly from the Lord Himself can open the mind. For the Lord reveals the 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, and 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 -- truth opens all the way to the Lord Himself. It is couched in the language of man, coming apparently through the prophets, through the apostles, through Emanuel Swedenborg. But the truth itself is from the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. And because it is His truth, He adds, "No man comes to the Father but by Me."

And therefore the Writings for the New Church also do not allow us to use them -- the Writings -- to control the minds of others. It is true that while children are growing up, we teach them truths from the Writings without questioning them. But we don't allow a child to confirm his faith. He or she must be an adult before taking that step. Time and again the Writings preach against historical faith -- the notion that what was good enough for your fathers is good enough for you -- and they reject all

faith on authority -- believing because people we admire believe. Time and again they urge the people of the church not to band together and decide what is true. We are not to make councils and decide what is true, nor ask people to believe in something because we, the leaders or older generation in the church, have seen it. "Put no faith in councils," they say, "but in the holy Word; and go to the Lord and you will be enlightened; for He is the Word, that is, the Divine truth in the Word" (TCR 624e). And again they say, "But, my friend, go to the God of the Word, and thus to the Word itself ... and you will be enlightened" (TCR 177e). The authority for the New Church is now and evermore will be the Word itself; it has no formal, written doctrine outside of it.

A person who is confirmed in the New Church is stating his or her faith in that Word -- the Old and New Testaments and the Writings. He is saying that he believes they are from the Lord and are the only authority, the only ruler over his mind. We must obey civil law, of course; we must observe moral laws; but we reserve the right to decide from the Lord Himself, from His Word, their justice, or the rightness of anything on earth or in heaven. In doing so we give up a certain freedom -- the freedom to espouse any idea we want, to decide for ourselves what is true; but we give it up willingly, for now we are saying that we want to be in favor, not of ideas but of what is true, and the Lord has shown us perfect truth. Many people may be tempted to disdain ideal truth. Like Pilate they might ask, "What is truth?" The Lord has answered that: "Everyone that is of the truth hears My voice." "I am the way, the truth and the life."

But in the last analysis we don't accept faith in the Lord in order to reject faith in other people and in false ideas. We accept it because we know that we need living faith, faith in living truth, so that we ourselves can be changed. There is only one thing in all this world that is perfect, and that is the Lord's Word, and when we turn to it, we are asking for that perfect, faultless help that flows through that Word from the Lord -- the help we need if we are to forsake evil and love what is good. When a man or a woman stands before the Lord and joins the New Church, he or she is taking just the first step along the path of a happy and blessed life. He or she is saying, "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief." "Lord, I know that in Your Word You are present. Guide me in all the steps that are to come.

Even when we accept Him He still gives us freedom. He shows us a perfect truth, and we can say, "I want it," or "I don't." But if we choose to,

then He gives us the power to find the ultimate freedom. Every angel of heaven is free to do what he or she wants, because what he or she wants is good.

This is the freedom which starts when a young man or woman declares a faith in the Word, which is the Son of God. "If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." Amen.

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