

## **Free-Will And Freedom. Part 1**

In a series of radio commentaries on the subject of Freedom, Leighton Ford, Billy Graham aide and evangelist, once recounted the experiences of Dr. Victor Frankl, widely read and respected psychologist, 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 even, 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 so 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, yet 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 of them.

Not only do we have here two very different views of man. They also 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 what he himself has chosen to become. However, if 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 Christian teaching and values; to accept or reject them. Throughout the Scriptures, as much in 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 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.

Clear teaching of the Scriptures 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 teachings 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 our attitudes are going to be; 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 with 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. Within the context of heredity and environment genuinely free choices are always possible.

"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", it is said, "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. Reciprocity, however, 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 free will is all about.

And even though the exercise of that free will 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 to suspend free will, to openly cut across the free choices and 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 free will if that is the only way to prevent it breaking out. Evil comes about because of our choices in its favour and God will not cut across those choices, or deny us those choices, to prevent it.

The second thing which arises here is this.

Man has free will because he, his mind and spirit, is held mid way between heaven and hell. Each influence him in equal measure. Neither is permitted to press too heavily upon him.

Imagine a situation where the influences of hell or of evil, did begin to press too heavily and the influences of heaven were too weak to counter balance them. Imagine a situation where unwittingly people were going forward into evil, doing evil not because they had freely chosen to do it but because the impulses reaching them were so strong as to tumble and sweep them along in front and irrespective of any conscious decision in their favour.

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 the equilibrium which was on the point of being lost; to set the balance right again; to give man back the opportunity to choose what he would become. This is why God took on human nature. By continual victories on temptation conflicts He at last restored the structure within the context of which life is received by us and as the result of which we are in equilibrium and have the ability to choose.

Though every normal person has free will this is not to say that everyone is free! On one occasion Jesus said that it is by means of truth that we become free. "You will know the truth", He said, "and the truth will make you free". (John 8:32).

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