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FEATURE

**Freedom and Constraints: A Glance
at Adventist Christian Goals**

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ABSTRACT - Freedom, in a Christian context, can be a confusing term. Unlike the secular definition of freedom, which includes a lack of restraint, Christian freedom begins with a total surrender to God and His law. Rather than restricting freedom, however, the paradox is that a master-slave relationship with God actually frees the individual from the bondage of sin. Adventist education should endeavor to foster the harmonious development of the whole person—physically, spiritually, intellectually, and socially. Freedom of choice is an important part of that development, and of bringing students into a saving relationship with Christ.

When people think of freedom, they tend to think of a freedom to do as they please or wish. But when people do as they please, they may find themselves in conflict with others who are also exercising their own freedom. These conflicts constrain their freedom and people are no longer free. They are constrained by external factors. People may also do or act as they wish but cannot accomplish what they wish due to their own inabilities. They are constrained by internal factors.

Freedom has been defined in several different ways. Adler (1985) describes two kinds of freedom. The first is the circumstantial freedom which people possess to the highest degree under the most favorable circumstances, where there are no obstacles like coercion and restraint. The impediments limit the extent to which human beings can do whatever they wish. Political liberty belongs to this category. It is a freedom possessed by those who live in a democratic country, because they possess a voice in their government.

The second freedom is the freedom that does not depend on outer circumstances. There are two types of freedom in this second category, even though both relate to the will of individuals. The first type is the freedom where reason subdues the passions and sensuous desires, and thus enables a person to will

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as he ought according to the moral laws or norms. It is a freedom acquired through moral virtue and practical wisdom. The second type is the freedom of will in its acts of choice. It is natural freedom to choose as man pleases or wishes. It does not depend on circumstances or acquired development. It is regarded as inherent in human nature (Adler, 1985).

The notion that individuals have the freedom of choice is refuted by determinism. Determinists believe that all events in the universe have causes (Thiroux, 1985). That is, everything in the universe is governed by causal laws and entirely determined so that whatever happens at any given moment is the effect of some preceding causes. Determinists argue that all human actions can be subsumed under scientific causal laws that govern the rest of physical behavior. Since every action is completely caused by heredity and environmental factors, there are no actions of free choice and humans are not responsible for any of their actions (Pojman, 1998). All their mental states and acts, including choices and decisions, and all their actions are effects necessitated by antecedent causes (Oxford, 1995).

Libertarianism on the contrary, refutes to some degree the notion of determinism. Libertarians believe that human behavior is not totally determined by causal laws. Given particular conditions at a certain time, a person can choose to do act *A* or act *B*. It is human choice that determines the resulting condition. Human action is casually undetermined (Titus, Smith, & Nolan, 1995). Libertarians contend that only some of human actions are free, not all of them (Oxford, 1995).

Some psychologists adhere to libertarianism. They hold the notion that humans are just complex machines that are subject to scientific control, which is “clearly the opposite of freedom” (Skinner, 1971, p. 41). Following this theory, if given external conditioning, humans are predictable objects of science (Rogers, 1969). Even if they are considered free, they cannot commit themselves to some meaningful purpose. Compatibilists believe that many beings in nature are determined but human beings are sometimes free to deliberate and to make choices, because of their consciousness and reasoning abilities (Butler, 1960). They argue that human beings still have moral responsibilities for their choices and actions. Their choice is a matter of voluntary and involuntary behavior (Thiroux, 1985). They believe that human beings still have feelings that they must deal with. They still feel resentment when someone hurts them. They will still feel grateful for services rendered and hold themselves responsible for their actions (Pojman, 1998).

Using these secular philosophical theories as background from which to compare and contrast the Adventist position, this article focuses on the freedom that is inherent in human nature, yet constrained by human inclinations or heredity, and how freedom relates to the educational concept of holistic development. The exercise of that freedom refers to the choice to develop or to remain static. Individual freedom of choice deals with the matters of being extant or extinct: eternal life or eternal death.

Freedom Constrained in Human Nature

“God values freedom” (General Conference, 2000, p. 1). He created human beings with freedom of choice (Genesis 2:16)¹. The freedom of choice is given for use in their development, because they are animate beings that live and develop. Created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27), humans have the opportunity to develop into the likeness of their Creator, because they are equipped with rational, moral, and artistic powers in the likeness of their Maker (Holmes, 1989).

Human development should be patterned after the incarnate Creator in the person of Jesus. Jesus is depicted as growing in four dimensions of human life: wisdom, stature, and favor with God and men (Luke 2:52). These four dimensions can be interpreted respectively as the mental, physical, spiritual, and social powers that an individual has to develop within personal freedom of choice. Humans have been given potential to develop (Holmes, 1989). It is their responsibility to choose to grow into the likeness of their Creator, because they are created in His image. The ultimate direction of human development is to become more and more like the Creator (White, 1903; Knight, 1989).

The first humans, however, misused the freedom of will granted by their Creator. The fact that the first humans chose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil shows that their will or desire was drawn to something that looked good and pleasing (Genesis 3:6). In choosing an apparent good or a false good they failed to exercise their free will to develop. Their wrong choice results in the decline in

¹ Scripture references in this article are from the New International Version (NIV).

life that finally leads to their extinction or death as the opposite of existence or life (Genesis 2:16-17; Romans 6:23).

Since then, human nature has been marred (White, 1903). From the masters of their own lives and “self-made creatures” (Holmes, 1989, p. 163) because of freedom, people have in turn developed evil inclinations in their thoughts and heart (Genesis 6:5). Accustomed to doing evil, they can no longer do good by themselves (Jeremiah 13:23). Because of this condition, people will eventually become extinct.

The above Christian philosophical thought about human nature is in contrast to the modern philosophy of humanism that has its ultimate faith in mankind. Humanists believe that human beings as evolutionary products possess the power or potentiality of solving their own problems, guided primarily by reason and experience (Brown, 1968). John Locke (“John Locke,” n.d.), in spite of his acceptance of the existence of God, coined the word *tabula rasa*, suggesting that human beings are born with an empty mind, ready to be written upon by the use of the five senses and the process of reflection. The idea of *tabula rasa* implies that humans are not natively depraved. Individuals are considered good and capable of developing themselves.

The Creator’s Intervention: Paradoxical Freedom

The Creator of mankind does not let people perish because of their evil inclinations. As a loving and responsible Creator, God interferes in this perverse and sinful nature of humanity with a plan of redemption, by offering a second chance for individuals to develop according to His grace (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7). The feeble person who chooses to receive the incarnate Creator will be the given power or the right to be born again “not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:13). God’s supernatural power (John 1:12) will enable the born-again person (John 3:5-7) to choose the good that leads them to eternal life (John 3:15-16). The good thing that he chooses is to “stop sinning” (1 Corinthians 15:34) and start following “His good purpose” (Phil. 2:13).

Sherlock (1996) explains that the Christian freedom is a paradox, due to human sin. The plan of redemption offered to humankind calls

for living not as slaves to sin, but in slavery to God (Romans 6:17-22; Galatians 5:1; 1 Corinthians 7:2). Since sin is defined as breaking God's law (1 John 3:4), a slave of sin is one who continues to break God's laws, and a slave of God is one who obeys His laws. By exercising this paradoxical freedom, man will be led back to a good life on this earth and to eternal life in the new earth (2 Peter 3:13), because the gift of God is eternal life (Romans 6:23). Christian freedom is actually voluntary obedience to God's laws.

However, the master-slave relationship of God and the born-again Christian should not be confused with the cruel practice of ancient as well as modern human slavery recorded in history. God the Master is a responsible Creator who lovingly takes responsibility for the individuals' life. Being the Creator of life, He respects life. It is His good purpose to create and sustain the lives of human beings. Because the Creator is *Agape*, He calls the human beings as His sons and daughters, and thus they can become heirs of His kingdom (Galatians 4:1-7; 1 John 3:1).

So the free obedience the believer deliberately renders to God should be based on a loving child-father relationship, rather than an uncaring slave-master relationship. Prompted by faith in the Father's loving care and amazing goodness, the believers as His children should exercise their freedom of will to choose to obey Him. And the freedom is no longer paradoxical, but a true and reasonable freedom.

Freedom and Educational Aims

God interferes in the problem of sinful human nature through the work of redemption, which is the work of education (White, 1903). This work includes "the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers" [of] "the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man (White, 1903, p.13)." The whole period of existence refers to the development of human life on this earth, which will be extended or continued in the new earth.

God, who is Life (John 11:25), must know what is best for the harmonious development of human life. A loving Creator, He must design His laws for the betterment of human life and development. Laws and principles that govern the physical, spiritual, intellectual, and social life of human beings, therefore, should be taught, applied, integrated, and manifested in all activities of Christian educational

institutions. The students are on the right track of holistic development when they choose to live in harmony with His laws.

Students as rational beings need to be trained as thinkers, rather than reflectors of others' opinions and ideas (White, 1903). Only thinkers can fully exercise their freedom of choice without coercion, while reflectors are constrained. In order to be thinkers, the teaching and learning should encourage the cultivation of the mind and the development of reasoning skills. White (1881) suggests that the exercise of the mind, in spite of its difficulties, increases mental strength and thinking power. "Our reasoning powers were given us for use, and God desires them to be exercised" (White, 1903, p. 231). Jensen (1988) advocates the use of reasoning skills, which are "are among the mysteries God has given us to develop throughout our lives" (p. 8).

Heavy reliance on memorization, which has been a tradition in Adventist schools, should be reconsidered. White (1903) says that "for ages the education has had to do chiefly with the memory" (p. 230), but training of the memory tends "to discourage independent thought" (White 1903, p. 230). With this method, students are not enabled to develop reasoning skills and judging power and thus lose the capacity to "discriminate between the truth and error" (White, 1903, p. 203). Students who are trained with only memorization cannot fully exercise their freedom of choice.

It is, however, not too late to restructure the teaching and learning methods in Adventist schools, if Adventist education is truly committed to the harmonious development of the students. It should start with a change in the attitude and mentality of the curriculum makers, educational leaders, educators, and parents. Then the young minds at home and at school should be trained to think in order to be able to exercise their freedom of choice, because God has given them "inquiring minds" (White, 1923, p. 368).

"The power to discriminate between right and wrong can be acquired only through individual dependence upon God" (White, 1903, p. 231). Each student should build a living relationship with the omniscient God, the source of knowledge and wisdom. This kind of relationship is spiritual in nature, because God is Spirit. He should be approached in spirit (John 4:23-24) and constant prayers (1 Thessalonians 1:15; Psalm 1:2; John 4:23-24). The concept of

freedom in this matter implies that the human relationship with God should free them from listening to, reading, searching, and believing in the voices and words that do not come from the Creator. This freedom should free the students from any relationship with other false gods or any other things that can be idols that undervalue God the Creator.

The aims of Adventist education, however, do not stop with the process of learning and building relationship with God. The ultimate goal of Adventist education is to produce responsible citizens who can render unselfish service to the community (White, 1903). The reasoning powers are to be trained as talents entrusted to them, “expecting that they will be used in the service of Christ for the uplifting of fallen humanity” (White, 1923, p. 368). In this case, the development of the students should also be considered from another dimension that is social development, which entails that the process of education should include the development of interrelationship skills. The concept of freedom in this aspect is to free the students from selfishness, because the character of their Model – the Creator – is love that shares what He has.

Kneller (1971) writes that “the fulfillment of freedom is communion with others” (p. 71). This attitude does not lead to a ruthless disregard of others’ interests, nor to fulfillment of one’s own needs at the expense of others’. True freedom implies not selfishness but communion. Communion is a certain intimacy with another person, when they meet as independent selves to share a single experience. Each of them preserves his uniqueness. As God in His love chose to create man for fellowship with Him, man should build a fellowship with his fellow beings on a voluntary basis (“The Christian philosophy,” n.d.). And in turn, those who have the fellowship of God’s love with their fellow beings grow better and better. “Freedom for the individual Christian grows out of his belonging to the community of Christ. No one is free in the Biblical sense who is out of relationship with God or others” (General Conference, 2002, ¶ 6).

In this way, the students are enabled to render selfless and joyful service to human kind and God on this earth and the new earth (Rasi, 2001). As White (1903) writes, such education “prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come” (p. 13).

Conclusion

Adventist educational endeavors should foster the balanced or harmonious development of the whole person – physically, spiritually, intellectually, and socially, in the context that human nature has been marred by sin. Man's incomppliance with God's laws constrains him in the slavery of evil that leads to suffering, deterioration, and eventually, extinction. The work of redemption – which is also the work of Adventist education – is to free man from the slavery of sin and thus bring him back to the right track of development that leads to the betterment and ultimately restores him back to the perfect of image of God in which he was created.

The human will to choose to be in harmony with God's will has been weakened by the bondage of sin. Human nature is prone to evil. Human beings need a supernatural power for refinement of their natural tendencies. This supernatural power will not come to them unless they freely choose to let their will be empowered or revived by the Holy Spirit. The first step students have to take in order to grow holistically is to exercise their freedom to accept God's plan of redemption, and that is also the aims of Adventist education. People must make up their minds to do so, because God in His love cannot coerce them to accept His plan of redemption.

Students can fully exercise their freedom of choice when they are trained to be thinkers, rather than reflectors. Reasoning powers are talents entrusted to the students in order to be developed so they can joyfully render selfless service to the community here in this world and in the new earth.

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