

The Hidden Benefits of Freedom

An Independence Day sermon

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn Church, July 5, 2026

“Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war.” Revelation 19.10

As we celebrate the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence this weekend, we begin today by looking at the story of the white horse in Revelation. The One on the white horse is the Lord Himself, as He is seen in the Word. A white horse stands for a true understanding of the Word. His appearance near the end of the book marks the final defeat of the forces of evil, removing their power to cause harm.

The possibility that a true understanding of the Lord’s Word might someday be dominant worldwide might seem remote. But if it were to come about it may not be hard to believe that this would go a long way towards removing the power of evil to cause harm.

The New Church teaches that this scene is a part of a process described in the book of Revelation which is changing the whole world. It was completed on June 19th, 1770, with the announcement that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns and that His kingdom will endure forever and ever. That spiritual event, unseen in this world, has been having its effects on us ever since.

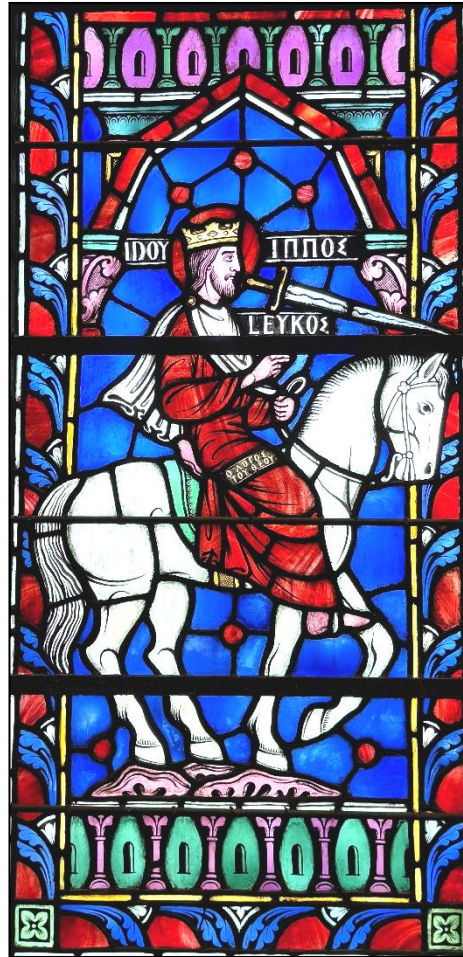
This was two hundred and fifty-six years ago, and while enormous changes have taken place around the world since then, none of them would appear to justify this claim. But if we look closely at what has happened, we might be able to see how the Lord works continually to make the world a better place.

What is the best form of government?

Yesterday we celebrated the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all

men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”



The Declaration briefly states the founding philosophy of this country – liberty, individual rights, and government by consent.

The Heavenly Doctrine does not advocate any particular form of government. Many good things are said about kings, queens, and emperors, even describing some as governing their people in the next life (*Last Judgment posthumous 104*).

They do, however, say that: *“A king with absolute power, who believes that his subjects are so far his slaves that he has right over their possessions and lives, is, if he exercises that power, no king but a tyrant.”* Heavenly Doctrine 324

A just ruler is therefore under the law and governs according to it (*Heavenly Doctrine 322, 323*). Other things are also said about the qualities that a just ruler should have.

But little is said about political systems. Forms like democracy and communism are not discussed.

Freedom has hidden benefits.

What is discussed, though, is the concept of political freedom – freedom of speech, and freedom of the press. The way that this is discussed, speaking about particular countries and describing specifics about what these freedoms do, is remarkable. Apparently, freedom has hidden benefits.

True Christianity, published just five years before

the *Declaration of Independence*, portrays the British differently than the Declaration does:

“As for the British, the better people among them are at the center of all Christians, because they have a profound intellectual light. This does not appear to anyone in the physical world, but it is blatantly obvious in the spiritual world. They owe this light to their freedom of speech and freedom of the press, and their consequent freedom of thought. (Among other peoples who do not have the same freedoms, that light is stifled because it does not have an outlet.)” True Christianity 807

According to this, the effect of political freedom on a people is to promote “a profound intellectual light.” Is this really true? Does freedom make people smarter?

According to Google *“Freedom of speech does not inherently make people smarter on a biological level, but it serves as a powerful catalyst for cognitive growth. By fostering environments where ideas can be freely shared, challenged, and tested, free speech expands knowledge, promotes critical thinking, and builds intellectual resilience.”*

So this advantage of freedom may not be hard to support. *True Christianity* even provides a counterexample to explain the idea further:

Speaking of eighteenth-century Germany we read:

“Since in each of its states Germans are under a strong individual leader, they do not have the free speech and freedom of the press that the Dutch and the British enjoy; and when free speech and freedom of the press are curtailed, freedom of thought, that is, of examining matters in a full and complete way, suffers as well... What flows in adapts itself to fit what flows out. Our higher understanding, then, adapts itself to fit the amount of freedom there is to say and do what we are considering. For this reason, the members of this noble nation devote themselves more to memorization than to forming their own opinions. This explains why they are especially fixated on literary history and tend to give so much credit in their books to the people among them who are well known and highly educated. They cite the various opinions of these people copiously, and then pick one of them to endorse.” True Christianity 814

The point here is that the lack of freedom stifles the “profound intellectual light” that they would have

had if they were free, leaving them to focus on citing authorities rather than forming their own opinions, according to this account.

Happily, Germans today are as free as the British and so this situation has presumably changed. The implication is that as freedom spreads the world will get smarter.

Are freedom and democracy expanding?

But is freedom spreading? In the past two hundred and fifty years democracy has spread from being the form of government of 5% of countries worldwide to over 65%. (www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Evolution-of-Democracies-1800-2000). Similarly the number of people who live in countries with freedom of the press and freedom of speech has increased dramatically.

While democracy and freedom of speech are not the same thing, the two are intertwined. Freedom of speech is a fundamental requirement for a functioning democracy. And while freedom of speech can exist in other forms of government besides democracies, it is a key aspect of the concept of the consent of the governed.

Still, it is important to realize that freedom does not necessarily make people good. The freedom that *True Christianity* praises so highly did not prevent Christianity from coming to an end in Britain just as it did throughout the Christian world. Freedom is merely a means allowing for future improvement.

As we in the United States celebrate this anniversary of our independence, we need to be conscious of our shortcomings as well as our strengths. Freedom and democracy may be good things that lead to a better future, but they do not cancel out the negative effects of immorality, materialism, and the many other spiritual ills that characterize post-Christian civilization according to the Heavenly Doctrine.

The intellectual light depends on leadership.

A very interesting and relevant aspect of the effect of freedom in the England described in *True Christianity* concerns the nature of the “profound intellectual light” attributed to them:

“That light is not automatically activated in them, however; rather it is stimulated by others—particularly by people who are famous or powerful. As soon as they hear the latter make some statement, this light dawns in them. For this reason they are assigned governors in the spiritual world

and are given preachers of great reputation and skill. Because of the native character they have, the British go along with the judgments of their governors and preachers.” True Christianity 807

That is, their insight is dependent on the nature of their leadership, so that when a respected leader speaks they recognize wisdom when it is there. Elsewhere this is given as the reason why they avidly seek out credible commentaries, reviews, and recommendations about everything from books to politics (*see Spiritual Experiences 5951*). They are even criticized because they become so obsessed with politics that their minds are drawn away from more worthwhile spiritual matters (*True Christianity 808*).

This may be why people are so highly interested in political and cultural leaders, and so ready to critique or praise their words and actions. In the culture of the fallen church there is no lack of things to criticize, but this does not mean that conditions worldwide are not moving in a positive direction.

Is the world moving in a positive direction?

We are told that for those who trust in the Lord, *“all things are moving towards an everlasting state of happiness, and that no matter what happens at any time to them, it contributes to that state... (For) Divine providence is overall, that is, it is present within the smallest details of all, and that people in the stream of providence are being carried along constantly towards happier things, whatever appearance the means may present”* (*Arcana Coelestia 8478*).

This is where the One on the white horse comes into the narrative. If the Lord is the one that we look to and listen to – if He is the one that activates the “*profound intellectual light*” in us as free people – then we will have a perspective on the things going on in our world and be less prone to the anxieties that life so often seems to promote.

As we said before, the One on the white horse is the Lord Himself, as He is seen in the Word, and the white horse stands for a true understanding of the Word. A similar white horse appears near the beginning of the book, which stands for those who love the Word and understand it clearly. At that point in the book this is not the dominant view. It isn’t until the end of the book, after the long process of change that its wars and revelations describe, that we see that the growing understanding of the Word, to the point that the Lord Himself is seen there, is

what defeats the power of evil.

If we think about it, we can see the progress towards this state happening all over the world. Even though evils exist and may even seem to rule, there has been a consistent increase in education and knowledge.

We also see freedom and democracy steadily increasing, creating the conditions for the “*profound intellectual light*” so highly praised in the British people. This is especially what we celebrate in America’s 250th anniversary – the freedom that this country stands for and that is spreading worldwide.

Freedom is never absolute. It is always limited.

One thing about freedom is that although we think of it in binary terms the truth is that freedom is always limited. Our speech and actions are necessarily constrained, making freedom a subject of discussion in even the freest of nations. People can disagree about what kinds of rules infringe on our freedoms. For example, the Heavenly Doctrine tells us that:

“In countries where justice and judgment are preserved everyone is compelled not to speak in opposition to religion or to behave in opposition to it, but still no one can be compelled to think and will in favor of it.” Divine Providence 129

“A king must be obeyed in accordance with the kingdom’s laws, and he must not be harmed in any way by word or deed. For on this the safety of the state depends.” Heavenly Doctrine 325

We might see these things as debatable. Yet the freedom to debate these things is itself something that contributes to that “*profound intellectual light*.”

Freedom leads to peace.

The progress of freedom brings peace to the world partly because nations where there is democracy and freedom of speech necessarily struggle to engage in warfare. Unless the nation faces an existential threat that is clear to everyone, any kind of military action will be subject to criticism and opposition, eventually making it impossible to continue the war. This would seem to give autocracies a significant advantage, except for the fact that once a population is convinced that military action is necessary, they will fight with a will that is often irresistible.

This is what makes freedom so powerful. This is why when the One on the white horse appears in

Revelation 19 the forces of evil submit to Him almost at once – despite the fact that He never even attacks them but merely defends against their attack. At this point the truth is clear.

For most of us that truth is not yet clear. But freedom has hidden benefits. What we celebrate on the 19th of June in the New Church, and in this 250th anniversary year for our country, is the spread of

freedom, and therefore of the truth, and therefore of that spiritual kingdom “*most dear to those who love her, most great to them that know. We may not count her armies, we may not see her King... (but) soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase, and her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her paths are peace.*” (I Vow to Thee My Country, Cecil Spring Rice, Hymn 903) AMEN

Readings from the Word

Revelation 19

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. ¹³ He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. ¹⁵ Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. ¹⁶ And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. ¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, ¹⁸ that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men." ¹⁹ And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. ²⁰ Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone. ²¹ And the rest were killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse. And all the birds were filled with their flesh.



Apocalypse Revealed 820

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse, signifies the spiritual sense of the Word revealed by the Lord, and the interior understanding of the Word disclosed thereby; which is the coming of the Lord. The reason that this is the coming of the Lord, is because it manifestly appears by that sense that the Lord is the Word, and that the Word treats of Him alone, and that He is the God of heaven and earth, and that from Him alone the New Church exists.

True Christian Religion 815

When it comes to the spiritual or theological teachings of the church, the nations that have freedom are like eagles that can soar aloft to any height; the nations that have no freedom are like swans swimming on the surface of a river. Nations that have freedom are like majestic deer with great racks of antlers, running wherever they wish through fields, woods, and forests; nations that have no freedom are like deer kept in a game preserve for the royal family's amusement. People who have freedom are like the flying horses known to the ancients as Pegasus, which fly not only over oceans but also over hills that are called Parnassian, and even over the Muses themselves below. People who have not been set free intellectually are like well-bred horses in beautifully studded halters, standing in the royal stables. [2] These similes represent different degrees of judgment in regard to theological mysteries.