

WILL – FREEDOM

(Medicine-of-the-Person Conference in Prague 2003)

While formulating this year's conference theme, we noticed that we had difficulties in translating, because the terms carry different meanings in various languages. Sometimes not being able to convey the finer nuances of a term is a basic problem at multi-lingual conferences. This is why I would like to define and rephrase the main terms in this opening session. What is meant by **will**? Where does it come from? What role does it play in our lives? **Freedom**: what is the basis for it? What is its goal? What is true freedom?

We can formulate definitions for both based on philosophy, psychology, law, as well as other disciplines from the humanities. Turning to history leads us to the roots in one of the oldest documents of humanity: the Bible. The Bible itself claims to be inspired by God and recorded by various authors, making it God's own unchanging word. We have just seen an extensive exhibition of Bibles, which has made clear to us the fact that there are no other written records which go back so far in time and are so well documented and confirmed archeologically as the Bible, in particular, the Old Testament. I am not a theologian, but my experience with God's Word, that testifies to the Truth as being the person of Jesus Christ (John 14:6), has served as my vital "daily bread" for 40 years, meaning my guide for life and death. Please understand my forthcoming remarks within this framework. My insights and conclusions on this topic have been supplemented through the use of commentaries, encyclopedias, concordances as well as exchange with other Christians.

I found the following explanation of the entry **will** in an encyclopedia of the Bible: in Hebrew, i.e. the language of the Old Testament, the will is not so much volition, but rather an influence and action, ultimately a "moving power of the heart". So the word "will" can be used as a translation for the Hebraic word "näfäsch", which in effect means soul, heart, disposition. Another Hebraic word for "will" is "ruach", which involves the spirit, also the spirit of God. The will is therefore the highest human function. Because of this close connection between spirit and will, the affinity of the human will for the godly or even the demonic realm and its dependence upon it is intimated. The will is therefore the center, the seat of a human being's promptings which can be influenced. So much for the encyclopedic definition.

If we assume that the will is, on the one hand, anchored in our hearts/dispositions, and, on the other hand, also influenced and guided by the spirit, i.e. our knowledge, we note that our wills are very complex in structure and are guided by knowledge and feelings. The knowledge, which comes from a foundation in our hearts or which touches our hearts, leads us to a decision and a deed, an influence and action.

Where does this foundation come from? Where does this knowledge come from? In the Bible we read that God laid this foundation in us (Romans 2:14-15 and I Corinthians 3:11) and, as our creator, gave us knowledge (Proverbs 1:7, Colossians 2:3 and I Timothy 2:4). In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, God is introduced as a ruler of the world who is personal and rational, who has will and intelligence at His disposal, and who is ethically beyond all criticism. It pleased Him to create us as His companion in His image like a mirror (Genesis 1:26) – out of nothing!

It is helpful here to consider the meanings of the two Hebraic words that we call image and mirror:

- “säälem, in English: shadow. A shadow can only do what the original does, such as see, hear, speak, think, act, love, etc. The shadow realizes its limitations in that it does not have command of the original. It is nothing without the original, just as the moon has no luminosity without the sun.
- “demuth”, in English: to be silent, to listen, to be compliant. Prerequisite to acting according to God’s will is listening to God’s directions.

In this account of creation, God’s will to create is expressed. This is mentioned and celebrated in song over and over again right up to the Revelation to John. The book of Revelation, a prophetic book, describes, among other things, what will one day happen in eternity before the throne of God where we will appear whether we want to or not. In Revelation 4:11 we are told of a choir who praises God by singing: “Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed and were created.”

In the same vein, the being and actions of God as the creator are celebrated in Psalm 33:9: “For He spoke, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.”

Moreover, we experience in verse 4 of the same Psalm that we can trust God’s word. That entices us to try it out. Jesus himself underlines this in the Gospel of John (John 7:17): “If any man is willing do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself.”

In addition we also discover in Psalm 33:11 that God has plans for all generations which He will carry out justly and mercifully. He is the absolute Lord of history. His will, which is expressed in the facets of the **will to create**, the **will to preserve** (The Ten Commandments, God’s mercy), the **will to judge**, and the **will to heal** is reality, even if we do not recognize this fact. Prerequisite to this realization is faith according to Hebrews 11:3: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.” When the Bible speaks of faith, it is speaking of God’s work in us (John 6:29). This knowledge cannot be regarded as simply a matter of course although it is stated so clearly. We have the freedom to accept or to doubt the truth of the written Word.

Where does doubt come from? Our Creator originally planned for us to be creatures, who as His companions, would only know good. But God had also created invisible angelic beings (heavenly hosts, as they are called in Genesis 2). Some of them rebelled against their Creator. In Isaiah 14:12 we read how their leader, Satan, using his God-given freedom, wanted to be equal with God. Therefore he couldn’t stay in God’s presence and was thrown down to earth. The Greek physician, Luke, records this event in Luke 10:18 by quoting Jesus as saying: “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.” By the way, Chagall painted an impressive painting of the fall of the angels. It can be seen in the art museum in Basel, Switzerland.

There are many mentions of Satan, literally “adversary”, in the Bible which report how he tempts, manipulates and murders through deception or blatant lies. He sows doubt on God’s character and encourages disobedience to God. His first victims were Adam and Eve. Satan is not human, but neither is he divine (he cannot create out of nothing). He has incredible knowledge and a lot of power, but is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. He is a rebel who

has already been conquered, who has no more power than is given to him by God. He has already been conquered by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but still exists.

I believe it is very important that we recognize and take seriously the reality of the adversary of God when discussing the influence on our will. Many think of him as a product of our human fantasy (a fairy-tale figure or, among other things, merely a symbol of evil). Satan is nevertheless a real non-human power as the example of Judas makes clear. I have heard of many examples and have witnessed how Satan has taken over a life and, on occasion, has even been able to destroy it. We are not talking about an interpretation, but a real power that is pleased when this power is not recognized, because then he can carry out his destructive work much more effectively. An expert in this area once observed that in a region where a lot of healing by incantations, etc. was taking place, the suicide rate was also especially high. It would go beyond the scope of our topic today to go into the connections in depth.

In Genesis very graphic language is used to describe how Satan found his first victims, Adam and Eve. What is reported? God had forbidden His first creatures to eat the fruit of a certain tree. Eve allows herself to be tempted by the serpent (Satan) to doubt the sense of this rule. Both Adam and Eve find it tempting to have knowledge that is above and beyond that which was God's will for them, namely to be able to discern between good and evil. – Satan himself had been unsuccessful at reaching this goal and was now trying to find allies to share his failure with in order to expand his realm of power. Adam lets it happen; at first he behaves passively and then eats from the fruit and becomes a victim himself. Originally it was enough to rely on God in their paradise. Their relationship, which was based on trust, was destroyed because they trusted Satan, one of God's creatures, more than their creator and broke the limits set for them by God. In the end, they were not freer or happier, but rather became conscious of their breach of trust and were confronted for the first time with God's will to judge. God is consistent to his word. They were driven from paradise, from God's constant presence and care so that they would not be able to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil again (Genesis 3:22-23). They now had to toil to make a living and die in the end. The story of the fall of man is a comprehensive and convincing explanation for the depravity of human nature. The cause of our bondage is recorded here as the consequence of our rebellion against God. Pascal once said that the teaching of the first sin appears to be an insult to reason, but once accepted is the key to understanding the condition of the human race.

Our need for autonomy has yielded the opposite: we thought we were striving for freedom, but this self-elected freedom turned on us as a curse. A well known pastor once summarized Romans 1: 22-27 in this way: "At first they wanted to be free, now they have to be free". The threat which comes through Satan's interference and temptation, which is often difficult to see through; the fear of the future; and finally, the fear of death keep us in bondage. In Ephesians 2:1-10 Paul is very clear about the connection between death and sin: when we selfishly want to control our own lives, to give in to the enticements of this world with greed, envy, unkindness, and self-determination over life and death, we hand ourselves over to the wrath of God. In this context I might remind you of topics within my area of specialization, such as pre-implantation diagnostics, prenatal diagnostics, abortion, as well as many of the discussions on stem-cell research and, last but not least, cloning.

Paul does not just leave us with this statement. He goes on to write that God, in His infinite mercy and love towards His creation, offers us a new life. He makes this possible through faith in Jesus Christ. This faith is a gift of God. I cannot earn it by doing good works; I can only accept it. (Ephesians 2:8-9, John 6:29)

As in Psalm 33 we also learn from Paul that, in addition to God's will to create, to preserve, and to judge, God also has a **will to heal**. God has made a way of escape so that we can be free again, really free!

Paul de Lagarde once expressed this Biblical connection of freedom and will in the these words: freedom does not mean that we can do whatever we want, but rather we may do what we should.

Jesus, God's begotten, and not created son, who has always existed and who, with God, created all of creation, as can be read in Genesis, Psalm 2:7 and Colossians 1:16, became man according to God's will. Because of God's righteousness and His great love for us, He paid the penalty of death, which is the consequence of our sin, for us on the cross, thereby destroying the power of death. We remember this act each year on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. This statement is an offence, or at least foolishness to some. Is our condition really so hopeless that someone had to die for us? Can't we design and master our own lives well enough? And besides, not everything I do is evil and egocentric! As a humanist I try to care for others and to spread goodness in the world.

In the parable of "The Prodigal Son" (Luke 15:14-17) we read that the son shares his inheritance, which was given to him before it was due, with others. He took his life into his own hands until he had reached the end of his rope and was caught in his unfortunate circumstances. In his hunger he had no reserve, nothing to fall back on. He then realized that he had a father who just might help him out of his predicament in spite of his previous self-willed behavior. He turned around. His father was already waiting for him, because his father's love had never ended. He experienced his father's blessing by returning home.

That is our situation as well: We want unlimited freedom; we want to rule our own lives, to search for happiness and self-realization. We reach limits through external resistance as well as limits that are set by our consciences, which were created by God. We are well off when we listen to the offer that God has made to us in Jesus Christ, an offer to turn from our high-handed ways and to trust in Him completely. In Christ we can free ourselves and let go of our burdens of guilt and all of our fears for the future. God has a plan for our lives, in which, to a certain extent, we also have something to say; for God has the knowledge and the power to carry out this plan even if we should stray from His path.

Is there then no such thing as complete **freedom**?

Humankind's dream of being independent of everything and everybody is deceptive. It leads us to ruin; we fall victim to the adversary of God, who promises us a lot in order to enslave us. He does not mean well: (I Peter 5:8) "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Aren't there those who have the need for a lot of human contact because they don't want to be alone in their misery? Only Jesus Christ, who has triumphed over death and Satan, can make us truly free (Colossians 2:15). Because He is our great high priest, our mediator (Hebrews 4:16), we may, with confidence and without fear, draw near to the throne of grace. He will show us His mercy and grace when we need His help. That is what makes one really free: bound to Him who created us as His companions; who holds everything in His hands; and who has taken the sting of death, which we caused through our striving for independence. Our ties to Jesus Christ result in a fellowship among Christians, which differs from the human contact previously mentioned among those who are still living in rebellion towards God.

It will never be heaven on earth for us in this life, because God's adversary is still allowed to do his destructive work; but Jesus Christ is stronger and we can always turn to Him even when the situation seems hopeless.

I have attempted to make clear that our striving for boundless freedom can only lead us to destruction; and that it is wiser to remember that we were originally thought of as God's companion, meaning that we should actually be as dependent as a "shadow" (säalem), listening and then answering and acting correspondingly (demuth).

I hope that we will be able to discuss how this can happen specifically in our daily lives and how to put it into practice in the next few days. Paul gives us a basic guideline in Galatians 5:13-14, in which he admonishes us to serve one another through love, which means obeying the whole law of God, which is fulfilled in one statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 22:39). Prerequisite to this is that we love God with an undivided heart; and not only respect Him, which would be a great deal in itself, but also trust Him (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Matthew 2:37).

Paul recommends again and again in his letters that we set our spirits (ruach), that we received from our Creator in order to be companions to Him, and our hearts (näfäsch) on God's Holy Spirit to listen and to follow Him. Why? Not only because He is the Lord, which awakes resistance in our natural self-confidence, but because He alone, as creator of all life, has an overall perspective and knows what is going on, and because He only wants the best for us.

From my own experience, I can say that when making difficult situations, it is truly liberating to seek God's will and to trust His leading even when it is not completely comprehensible from the beginning. - God's way of thinking, God's logic and God's righteousness are different than the way we think and our sense of justice (Isaiah 55:8). - But His leadership is loving, cautious and does not demand too much of us. Many Christians in crises have experienced security in God especially in the most distressing situations. Very often the reality of God and His care are most intense when we are experiencing difficulties. That is when it is so delightful to see how adversities lose their importance and become more bearable.

Sometimes I ask myself how people can bear extreme burdens without the God who is testified to in the Bible? For many these burdens are a challenge to come to God, because having reached the end of their ropes, they feel compelled to honestly examine themselves. This is when they really get vital answers to their questions. Others become bitter, despair and become ill. Their free will is powerless and worthless. To admit that, as the prodigal son did, takes the courage to be honest and costs a great deal of effort. They don't dare believe God's own words. There are so many false doctrines! Instead of giving up their useless free wills and turning to the Father of us all, they get lost in fruitless discussions, which are based on temporal things (Matthew 24:35); in self-pity and blame; or they apathetically bear the things they feel they cannot change.

Only when we accept the will of God our Father, in particular, His will to heal, shown to us through Jesus Christ, will we truly be free – even in the most adverse situations. This will of God is what we ask for daily during our devotions when we pray the Lord's Prayer. Paul was given this knowledge when he met the risen Savior personally. Saul's free will was broken. Only then was he able to become the blessing he was for so many people – for us, as well, if we are willing to open our hearts, the seat of our will, completely to God. Everyone has the freedom to do so, the freedom founded in Christ, not in ourselves.