

Speech André Rouvoet, deputy prime minister of the Netherlands at the European Prayer Breakfast – December 2, 2009 - Brussels

Dear friends,

Thank you very much for the invitation to address this years European Prayer Breakfast. It's good to be in the company of brothers and sisters in Christ, all working in different positions in the corridors of power. This is a good occasion to remind each other about the meaning of our relationship with Jesus for our personal lives and families, for our work and for the part of the world that we live in, Europe.

One of the central values of the European Union is freedom. This theme came to my mind when we celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall last month. We all have seen the moving images of the happy crowds, pushing through the firstly opened checkpoint at Bornholmer Strasse, and of the euphoric people cutting down the hated wall. Free at last! The era of oppression was over. Many of you present here come from the former Soviet states, and know from personal experience what this meant to your people.

As for me, never in my life I saw a better illustration of the importance of freedom to the human person. And we should never forget about this.

I think however that today we also have reason to fundamentally rethink the idea of freedom. To explain this, I will make two points:

- 1-why the Western idea of freedom runs into problems
- 2-how biblical insights can help us rethink freedom

Ad 1 Why our idea of freedom runs into problems

I was intrigued by a comment of a well-known radio- and televisionhost in my country, Martin Simek. He fled from Czechoslovakia in 1968. In the Dutch newspaper *NRC* he wrote that when he came to the Netherlands, he expected to see happy people celebrating their free existence. But what he saw around him were 'gloomy faces'. "As if nobody really enjoyed being free", he wrote. "It was like they wanted more of something they already had". The question that is still puzzling him up till today is: "what exactly is freedom?" This is a very good question. What is the current idea of freedom? I think the most widespread concept of freedom in our collective consciousness is the liberal idea of maximization of the individual right to do whatever you like as long as it doesn't harm the rights of your fellow citizens.

It's what Isaiah Berlin called 'negative liberty': the absence of coercion.

We should affirm the good side of this idea: protection of the individual against an intervening state, and the guarantee of both political and economic freedom. Surely, this was the right answer to the threat of a dictator taking over power in the Second World War, and to the Communist regimes. It is still good news to be brought to those parts of the world where people are suffering from oppression, fear and poverty today.

However, there's a downside to this idea of freedom. We seem to have forgotten about the purpose of it. Let me illustrate this point. On a cultural level, freedom-loving Westerners, especially the children of the cultural revolution of the sixties and seventies, seem to *exaggerate* freedom. This shows in the way they relate to each other and in their lifestyle. Somebody once wrote about Western lifestyle: "we're buying things we don't need, to impress people we don't like". For many children of the sixties it is true what Martin Simek wrote: they walk around with gloomy faces, because they want more of what they already have. This is not only true for the personal morale, it's also true for our economic life on a larger scale.

It's the exaggerated pursuit of profit and of consumption that caused the current global financial and environmental crises. I think we are all aware that these crises have very unjust consequences: those who profit the least and who are the least responsible pay the highest price, in the countries of Africa and the Asia-Pacific region, where people live in areas vulnerable to floodings or draughts. Due to carbon emissions from the wealthy West.

On the political level we see freedom is threatened by absolutization of the individual rights. For example: it's an absolutization of the freedom of speech and expression to claim the right to insult, to hurt people in their deepest religious feelings. It is an absolutization of the right to equal treatment too forbid religious people to have organizations that hire staff which has the same faith or convictions. One would assume that these are very unliberal points of view, but in Europe as well as in my own country this debate is being initiated over and over again by liberal (or should I say: libertarian) politicians. I'm afraid this is because in fact there's not an agenda of freedom at work here, but a secular agenda, and –consequently- an agenda of restraining religion and believers. This has little to do with freedom. This is demonstrated in the debate on whether or not religious symbols should be allowed in the public sphere.

The picture is clear: the people that came from the former Soviet-Union knew very well *from what* they wanted to be freed. But they came to a free world in which many people don't seem to have a clue what to use freedom *for*. The liberal idea of freedom as maximizing individual rights offers only a negative concept of freedom: it leads to a sense of purposelessness. On top of that, the tendency to ban religion from the public sphere demonstrates that it's not so freedom-loving after all. My conclusion is therefore that our understanding of freedom needs rethinking.

2. why biblical insights can help rethink the meaning of freedom

The question our Czech friend posed was: What is freedom? I think from what I've said just now, the more adequate question is: what is freedom *for*? Can we find a concept of freedom that makes us serve our economic needs instead of our greed? A freedom that makes us enjoy Creation instead of exhausting it? That makes us honour our neighbours, instead of hurting their deepest feelings? That makes us listen to the voice of minorities instead of silencing them? A freedom that defends the rights of others instead of trying to confine them?

Let us explore what we can derive from the Bible. I want to highlight two basic principles about freedom.

The first is about the purpose of freedom. We can learn from the part of Scripture that we read from Paul's letter to the Galatians (5:13): "*You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love*". The key message from this passage is: yes, a man is meant to be free, but if he really wants to enjoy it, he needs to escape from self-centeredness, and learn to live loving one another and seeking righteousness. This is the missing link, the blind spot in the widespread negative concept of freedom. This is why Western culture tends to get off the right track, and doesn't enjoy the fruits of *real* freedom.

There's a telling parallel to the fall of the Berlin Wall in the Old Testament in the story of Exodus. The Hebrew people was liberated from centuries of Egyptian slavery, and saved from Pharaoh's troops through the Red Sea. But after being freed, God didn't send them to the promised land with the message: now go, have fun and do as you like! God knew his self-centered people better than that. He gave them the Ten Commandments, to teach them about the good life. To modern ears it's hard to understand that the law is not a moral cage full of restrictive bonds, but the path that leads to freedom.

As we read in Deuteronomy 8: *"For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land"*. Maybe modern ears can understand what Paul says a little further in his letter to the Galatians: *"The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."*

Yes, unless we stop telling ourselves the lie that we are born to be autonomous individuals with the right to do whatever we want (a lie that *justifies* our self-centeredness instead of *redeeming* us from it), our society will not be on the road to freedom but on the road to social degradation and even planetary selfdestruction.

We know the pattern from the story of the Hebrew people: they really got off the right track and had to roam in the desert. It took them a generation to die before their children could enter the promised land. If we realize that true freedom means obeying laws, maybe we could be wiser and leave the desert more timely?

The second principle regards the role of government. In Romans 13 the authorities are called 'servants of God', which should be obeyed. The Bible however draws a clear line: "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29).

However important, government remains a *servant*. No room for totalitarianism here, and a clear hint that the separation of Church and State is a genuine biblical insight. Government is not to guard the theological truth, but to guard justice. "*Not by power, not by might but by my Spirit, says the Lord*". We don't defend the freedom of religion and the separation of Church and State by concession, but by confession!

Let me elaborate on this. The separation of Church and state doesn't mean that government should refrain from moral choices. In my political view government supports and protects the development and functioning of the different spheres of society *according to its God given purpose*. Freedom of society will be guaranteed best when the government refrains from interfering in societal spheres. Only if people act against the norm of public justice, government should not hesitate to intervene in the sovereignty of a sphere. For example: limitless bonuses to executives that stimulates irresponsible risk-taking is destabilising the financial system and thus public justice is at stake: so regulation is a good thing. Another example: the violence against children is definitely against the norm of public justice, so the authorities should intervene in the family life.

Of course this implies that government can never be morally indifferent or neutral. And exactly because of this view Christian politics is often met by angry responses. When my own political party, the Christian Union, became part of the Dutch cabinet, people were talking as if a small fundamentalist minority was going to impose its morality on the nation, and was severely going to restrict the freedom of our society. At first this struck me as a strange thing, as I can think of many reasons why a secular party coming to power might mean a greater threat to freedom than a Christian party, as I already explained.

Still, these negative reactions should make us look at ourselves too. We should be aware that our message is complex. As followers of Jesus we have learned the lesson that freedom is not the same as lifting the limits, and that on the contrary, freedom is realized through *respecting* limits. But this is not obvious to everybody.

Nowadays however, there are many examples that might illustrate the point. Take sexual liberty: in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere in Europe young people grow up with a lot of individual freedom on this theme. But as a consequence, 25% of the Dutch young women between 15 and 24 years old say to have experienced coerced sexual violence. The current Dutch government has now decided to stimulate boys to behave more responsibly.

Or take the use of alcohol as an example: we grant our young children lots of freedom, but as a consequence the drinking behaviour of 22% of the young Dutch people between 16 and 24 years old is called 'problematic', which means they are damaging their brain development. The current Dutch cabinet is now preparing a ban for children up to 16 years old to have alcoholic drinks with them. This illustrates the point Paul makes in Galatians 5 that if we pursue freedom without direction or limits, people may get trapped under a new 'yoke of slavery'. Therefore it is not a contradiction when a government puts limits to freedom, because in the end it will lead to more freedom. True freedom is obeying laws. We are not advocating bans and prohibitions for the sake of hindering people, but because it is our conviction that in the end it is a path to real freedom. Like the Ten commandments were given to the people of Israel as a way to enjoy 'the good life' in the promised land. It is a pity that the Bible as the book of Christianity does not immediately remind people of this good life of real freedom and wellbeing. Many Europeans tend to think of faith as a system of moral restrictions.

This is a problem, because it is an obstacle for communicating the most important message about freedom the world needs to hear. We need to take this problem seriously if we want to tackle it properly.

From my own experience, there are two important factors that can improve our message coming through. The first is to always put the interest of the other in the first place. Our voice in the public arena should be rather one of compassion than of judgment. It's not our own interests we're serving. We have to make very clear why our society will be better off if our ideas and proposals would be implemented. To illustrate that this can work, I can refer to many policy ideas of my own party that through the years gained public support and have now become cabinet policy.

The second is that in our personal lives we should live recognizably as people who are freed from self-centeredness. Only then we can be what Paul calls 'living letters', telling others about the love of God, and the freedom that living in relationship with Him brings. In our way of interacting with other people, the way we argue with them, the way we make up with them, the way we show attention for what's in their hearts and minds, the way we talk about other people should all reflect the love of our Father.

Last year I quoted from a song of Amy Grant, called 'My fathers eyes'. It's about the fact that when a child resembles its father, people will say: "You've got your fathers' eyes!". It's my deep wish that the people we meet look at us and say: "You've got your Fathers' eyes!"

It is my wish that in this way you and me, as followers of Jesus, can start a conversation about 'real freedom' for Europe. So that we can ignite a longing in the hearts of people for the fullness of life. As it was meant from the beginning of time, and as it will one day be restored. As we read from Galatians 5:1: "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.*"

-O-O-O-