

Freedom in Relationships

By Pastor Christopher Seah

In a small church, there are many opportunities to get to know people. But over time, members tend to grate on one another. This grating is partly due to the different personalities that form the church. Some are go-getters. Others are purists. Others are carefree. This grating is also due to different hopes people have for the church. Some want more activities and programs. Others envision a place to rest and recuperate from the stresses of life.

The grating is further intensified in the pursuit of holiness. As much as we like to say that a church is a hospital for sinners, a church is not a place where anything goes. Even hospital patients are not allowed to leave their beds to clobber other patients. There are rules to follow, legitimate expectations to meet. God calls his people to be holy as he is holy (Lev 19:2). There is therefore pressure to conform to what we believe are God's requirements. This pressure is right and needed.

And then we have all the other activities and stuff that go into the running of a church: Procedures, meetings, codes of governance, financial scruples, administration, and so on.

Under the weight of all it has to do, a small church like ours can become a pressure cooker over time; a place of competition, rivalry, exhaustion, and discontent. It can become a place where one member looks at another and says, "How come he's not doing anything?"

If this grating is not managed well, a small church could burn out over time and become ineffective—even embarrassing—to the Lord.

Is there anything we can do to prevent our church from imploding under all the interpersonal grating? Yes. One important key to reducing a church's inevitable grating is the practice of Christian freedom. In the area of our relationships, this means observing and protecting *freedom* in the way we relate to one another; treating one another with generosity and largeness of heart.

It can be dangerous talking about freedom. If anything, we seem to have an excessive love for it these days. Foul-mouthed bloggers want more freedom of speech. Hedonistic types want freedom of expression. In this dizzying craze for freedom, some might react strongly to any notion of freedom at all. Doesn't freedom lead to license? Won't freedom lead to riots in the streets, economic meltdowns, and other apocalyptic scenarios? Well, maybe. But as even common sense would tell us, the abuse of a thing does not make it bad or unimportant. It was Paul himself who said: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). With regard to the Galatian Church, Paul was concerned that the Galatian Christians were selling themselves to a system of works-based salvation. And with regard to the Colossian Church, Paul was concerned that the Colossians were being lured into a man-made mystical tradition, which was also a form of works-based salvation. So he writes in

Colossians 2:20-22: “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?” Judging from those two statements by Paul, it seems that freedom has a place in the Christian life.

But long before the enlarged freedom of Christ dawned upon the world, an ethic of freedom was written into the Law itself. The Lord instructs his people not to add to his Word (Dt 4:2; Prov 30:6). That means people do not have the right to impose man-made morals on others. All that is needed for righteous living can be found in the Law of God or deduced from it. Thus, even in the state of her immaturity, Israel knew what freedom was. The Israelite was not free to disobey God (and neither are we). But the Israelite was free to do whatever else God had not prohibited in his Word.

From those Scriptural factors, we can roughly discern how the ethic of Christian freedom could play out in our relationships. First, Christian freedom in our relationships is about *accepting people as God has made them*. This means accepting another member as a child of God, justified in Christ, and in the process of being purified by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:11). This also means accepting people the way God has made them. Some are quiet. Some are exuberant. Some are planners. Some are thinkers. Some are activists. Some are purists. We are the way we are because of God’s dealings with us. Therefore, we need to accept one another. Or as Paul says, “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15:7). There is no place for rudeness, snobbery, or elitism in the Body of Christ.

Since Christian freedom is freedom from man-made traditions, freedom in our relationships also means *being careful about what we require or expect from others*. In a church, we should expect that our fellow members, sinful as they may be, are growing in holiness. But observing Christian freedom means holding off on unbiblical or even extra-biblical expectations and requirements. For example: It is right to expect that a member marry a Christian. That is Christ’s requirement (1 Cor 7:39). But it is not right to require that a member marry only a fellow church member; or someone from the same race, or the same economic class.

Third, observing Christian freedom in our relationships also means *learning to take no for an answer*. This can be hard for us to do. But in order for freedom to have any validity at all, we need to allow others the right to say no to our requests, to disagree with us—and to do all that in a spirit of generosity, even cheerfulness! That means no guilt-trips, no silent treatments, and no attempts at revenge in response. Learning to take no is part of dying to self. Learning to take no is vital to a relationship. One reason relationships fray is because we will not do this for one another. We reduce a relationship to a set of expectations. We do not treat one another as persons who are free in Christ to have their own minds. So we oppress in subtle ways. Sure, we pay lip service to the freedom to disagree. But we are secretly upset when people do. So, we let fly off-putting remarks, frowns of disapproval, and sighs that mean “*haiya*, why like that?” Those are often indicators that we may not be very generous at heart.

Sure, those gestures have their place. There are things that we simply cannot accept with open arms. A wife has the right to say no to a husband's adultery. A church member has the obligation to say no to heresy. But by and large, our dealings with one another do not fall into that kind of severity. Unless we are sure that a real sin is present, we need to give one another the benefit of the doubt. Rudeness and unkindness are out of place in church. God wants us to love according to the truth; but also speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). I am sure Peter's call to give a defense for our faith in gentleness and respect applies also to fellow Christians (1 Pet 3:15).

Finally, observing Christian freedom also means *saying yes to one another*. Thanks to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, we do not have to live self-protective lives. Through Christ, God has come to us and filled us with his infinite self. We are free to open our hearts to the needs of others. We are free to put down our hobbies and our work to help others without fearing that we will lose out in life. While we have the right (and sometimes the duty) to say no, we also have the right (and often the duty) to say yes to one another. Our yes to one another arises from God's yes to us in Christ (2 Cor 1:19).

Practicing Christian freedom in our relationships will not entirely ease the interpersonal grating that happens in a small church like ours. But I believe it will go a long way in helping us all. May God give us grace with one another.