

Digging Deeper for True Spiritual Freedom

By Don Toshach

There's a huge hole on our property. I didn't know about it until my next-door neighbor showed it to me from his back patio. Five feet deep, four feet wide, six feet long. An epic crater on the slope behind the backyard chain-link fence, dug by my youngest son and the boys from the 'hood. The threat of our back-forty dropping into the canyon below is a real one with rain on the way. So I hopped over the fence to help fill in the hole with some adolescent assistants. After an hour of slinging shovelfuls, I began dreaming of dump trucks loaded with earth...or at least wheelbarrows.

When boys dig holes, they have no thoughts of landslides or the eventuality of having to fill their excavations back up. Dirt is tossed aside with abandon. Visions of buried treasure, a tunnel to China, or a secret hiding place are the objects of the quest. Only adults worry about consequences and liabilities, and getting dirt and mud out of clothes and carpet.

Most of us grew up too fast. We went from carefree to careful in a millisecond. Only in hindsight do we appreciate the freedom that we once took for granted. The grown-up world is an endless parade of filling holes, and trying not to create more.

Freedom is an f-word for which no five-second delay is needed. [Note: I wrote this sentence several days before *The Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson used this statement for the word "fantasy" during his acceptance speech at this year's Academy Awards.] The mention of freedom is rich with red, white, and blue flag-waving symbolism. Young men and women fight for it, and, in distant lands, die for it. Everybody wants to be free. Financially set. Occupationally secure. Relationally at peace. Why do families war over estates and people wait in long lines to buy tickets for nine-figure lottery jackpots? Deep down, past the greed and entitlement, is an illusion of freedom masquerading as reality. Many powerful political and societal ideas and fantasies of freedom get dragged into our spiritual walks, and the path we tread can get muddy. Undaunted, we know that the mud means water is present, and true freedom is near.

I'M FREE...OR AM I?

Mention spiritual freedom and someone will blurt out Galatians 5:1: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." The use of freedom in this context denotes completeness—a finality to the bondage of sin we were born into and live in. Jesus took the prison key from the guard of death, unchaining and releasing us. The verses following Galatians 5:1 show how easily it is to be slapped back into handcuffs of slavery. A fully staffed recruiting office of Jesus-plus-something-else advocates never closes, enlisting those in every generation who love the tangible features of the law over the ambiguities of grace.

Another popular phrase in Word and song is "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17). The mark of the Holy Spirit's placement in an individual, a church, or in a community is that freedom will be experienced. A lifeless, listless gathering means the Spirit has left the building, is on a leash, or never came in the first place. People experiencing liberty in worship, transforming revelation in teaching, power in sharing their spiritual gifts, generosity in giving, and joy in service may not characterize them as the fruits of freedom, but they are.

Yet, we can live in a double-whammy delusion of freedom as westernized Christians. We believe we are free by virtue of living in the land of the free and the home of the brave. As benefactors and partakers of the cross and the resurrected life, we have overcome the sting of death to embrace eternal life in Christ. Citizenship in America and heaven seems like ultimate ticket to freedom has already been punched. Un-freedom abounds, however. Who among us has fully escaped the gravitational pull of the approval and applause of men? Who has replaced worry with contentment in all things, in all seasons, in all circumstances? Whose thought life, tongue, and motives are pure even 80 percent of the time? Who is able to echo Paul in saying, "But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and His grace to me as not without effect"? It isn't about perfectionism, but we have several more stops on the Underground Railroad before trading in our slave clothes.

Spiritual freedom is mystical, personal and highly subjective; it is aligned with our experiences, both good and bad. How many times have you been in church services or

conferences when everyone else but you seemed to be having the time of their lives? For you, though, it's a big thud. Conversely, one can find pockets of Spirit-freedom in the gatherings pumped full of embalming fluid. The Spirit of God encounters us uniquely, and each encounter is a new dimension of learning.

Christianity has a long and multi-colored history of freedom fighters reacting to the limits of the current religious establishment. What started with Jesus and the Pharisees has continued with schisms and factions thumbing their noses at one another, taking up pens and swords to get their points across in the name of doctrine and style. Differing opinion can be quite flammable. Along the way, some misconceptions of freedom have sprung up like crabgrass on a neglected lawn.

MISCONCEPTION #1: FREEDOM MEANS ANARCHY

Consider a strong undercurrent of believers who hold that the church would be better off without anyone as the designated leader. They say, let's just gather and play on a level field, everyone on equal par. Banish all leaders to outer darkness. Don't trust anyone in a clerical collar or with an ordination certificate on his or her wall.

A leaderless church sounds positively Utopian at first blush. Christ is the Head of His church, and if 1 Corinthians stopped after the first few verses of chapter 11, we might have been able to build a palatable case. But an anatomy lesson surfaces from the Scriptures: a body, with many members working together to bring glory to Him, and a hinting at the five-fold government of the church that Ephesians 4 further illuminates. Many have postulated and even experimented with co-pastoring, staff teams of equal standing, or housechurches with no chiefs and all Indians, metaphorically speaking. Eventually, one discovers that anything without a head, or with more than one head, usually is a monster! If you saw the recent news bite of a mutated three-headed, six-legged frog found in England, you get the visual.

What's behind this mirage-like reverse power grab of spiritual anarchists? I believe it's an understandable, but no less extreme reaction to totalitarianism and institutionalism in the church, motivated by and large by people who have been hurt by authority figures. It is a multi-million-member club. See all the hands in the air? One would be hard-pressed to find someone who hasn't been had a disappointing or debilitating experience with a church leader. This is a tragedy, no doubt. For centuries, followers have mistaken control for guidance, out of their great father-need. Or the converse: People wounded by past leaders or father figures can jump to the immediate conclusion that any attempt to guide is a spirit of control. Out come the swords, deflector shields, ten-foot poles, and poison pens.

Stop! As Jesus' own, we are called "a chosen people, a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9). Someone just needs to come alongside to equip the chosen, believe in them, make room for their gifts, and apostolically bless them as they launch out to birth and build. Easier said than done, of course, or the church would be farther along than it is.

The solution is not to look at church leadership with the kind of suspicion reserved for members of Al-Qaeda. It is to move beyond the title obsession and paper credentials to locate spiritual fathers and mothers who have kingdom interests rather than personal empires in mind. They are people who have died to the way things presently are in the church to live today according to how the body of Christ will be in the future. Their lives are a demonstration of kingdom-now. As a result, they are often unrecognized, under-supported, and misunderstood, and they have pretty much gotten past caring about any of that. Some are mistitled, toiling in the trenches of established churches; others lurk at the fringes, imparting life quietly. Some have reputations as renegades; they don't fit in the usual "leader boxes." These spiritual fathers and mothers, when given the chance, facilitate church gatherings that recognize the Lord's anointing on people and encourage them to leave the dugout to step into the batter's box. One of the greatest compliments you can pay them is that people wonder who is leading their meetings, because it isn't always apparent as their decrease permits others to increase. They reject labels, even that of a spiritual father or mother, because they would prefer such a title to be bestowed on them by sons and daughters who receive their Isaiah 11:2 seven-fold ministry of the Spirit: "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of the counsel and power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord."

Paul saw the glaring gap in the church of Corinth: “Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers....” (1 Cor. 4:15). He was bold enough to offer himself as one, and then send his “son” Timothy (a “father-in-training”) to not just teach them, but be a present reminder of his way of life in Jesus (v. 17). Today’s church governments are replete with guardians and pastors, with their evil twins: front-men and figureheads. Fathers and mothers of the spiritual landscape are desperately needed. If you don’t see any around you, look in the mirror: You could be one of them. God will show you.

MISCONCEPTION #2: FREEDOM IS FOUND ONLY ON A MOUNTAINTOP

Once we taste the sweetness of liberty upon slipping from the noose of our “stuff” or the clutches of what Graham Cooke terms being “in bondage to religious systems,” our human tendency is to view freedom as a momentary mountaintop experience. How curious it is that many people come into a gathering of God’s people, have a phenomenal encounter with the Lord in worship, receive fresh insight, or delight in newfound joy and encouragement, and then they disappear into the Bermuda Triangle! They crawl back into the same church gathering six months or a year later in worse shape than they were previously. Why? They had limited expectations. A life-transforming God-encounter can’t happen two weeks in a row, can it? We are led to believe by our own brokenness and the deceiver that being in the Lord’s presence cannot be this good consistently, so days turn into weeks, the glory fades, and it is back into the gutter until the next magical high.

I heard several years ago a minister speak on dehydration—how the body craves fluids to replenish itself during exertion. The danger is that if a person ignores his parched condition and does not drink for a period of time, thirst goes away, despite the fact that the body’s idiot light is blinking. Likewise, if we ignore our thirst for living water long enough, we become spiritually dry to a dangerous degree. We are not camels, but some of us try to be.

Others, like Peter, love mountaintop real estate and have the itch to build shelters to stay forever on personal mounts of transfiguration. Have we fixated on weekend retreats, high-powered conferences, and the books and tapes of well-known speakers to provide the equivalent of a Starbucks wake-up rush to our groggy spiritual journeys? Insightful input from outside sources is beneficial for realizing that the plateau we’re on isn’t high enough. But you and I have at our disposal the same God as those authors and speakers we admire, but our laziness and low-esteem issues of the Lord meeting us personally elevates dependence on the “more anointed.” Don’t you think it’s time to stop being satisfied with jumping from lillypad to lillypad in second-hand ponds and exercise some first-hand trust about God meeting us one-on-one? Can we learn to access Spirit-freedom in the open plains and valleys where the majority of our lives are lived?

In the last several months, the Lord goes with me on my morning walks. What a difference an hour makes in having some divine companionship, a chance to upload my praise and petitions, and listen for His voice. There is a peace that settles on me that is unmistakably missing when I miss a morning or two. There is a rhythm of relational solitude with the Shepherd that is locally accessible. Can I ascend the hill of the Lord? I can, and an actual hill isn’t required.

MISCONCEPTION #3: FREEDOM MEANS ANYTHING GOES

Do you remember how you felt on the last day of elementary school when the final bell rang? Delirious exhilaration. A whole summer of freedom! Three months that seemed like forever. Stay up late, sleep in, work at play, hang out with friends. Your own time, your own schedule. Vacations, clubhouses, bike trips to the corner store for gum and candy...those were the days!

When we experience freedom, especially after a long incarceration in an unhealed place or a non-life-giving ministry environment, we feel like children again, and school’s out. No more pencils, books, or teacher’s dirty looks. We savor our newfound freedom and test its limits. That’s normal and healthy. The ecstasy of freedom is just what the Doctor orders for us, but it is an enticing and intoxicating drug. It feels so good, we’ll do nearly anything we can to get more and keep the buzz.

When liberty goes too far, license is the outcome. *Webster’s* defines license as “excessive or undue freedom.” Where is the line crossed? License is not a one-time incident, but

an ongoing pattern of acting in presumption: assuming a place of authority or position before it is offered, rebelling against God's boundaries of biblical protocol, exhibiting a lack of love, deference and preference toward others in the body, and being unteachable and unresponsive to even the mildest correction. Think of the proverbial bull in a china shop—lots of noise, damage, and clean-up on Aisles 7, 8, 9, and 10.

And there's a quieter side of license—a passive-aggressive force maneuvering behind the scenes to push personal agendas or exert independence and control under the guise of being "helpful." You might notice it more readily in a public gathering when there is cluster of people fellowshiping or praying for one another despite the fact that the rest of the body is worshipping. This is one example of many kinds of distractions that often prevent a meeting from achieving the heights it could if everyone was seeking to move as one. At times, journeying into freedom requires making tough calls, addressing things that appear to have elements of freedom, but are actually keeping the body of Christ from a greater experience of freedom as a whole.

I love the maverick spirit in the body of Christ—those wild horses that regularly jump fences to gallop across boundless pastures. There may be times when one person's display of extravagant freedom or a strong exhortative word in the midst of a comatose church gathering may be a sign and a wonder, have a prophetic bent, and call people into a new place of liberty. The Holy Spirit often disorders as He reorders. However, it doesn't take long to recognize the problem children of "freedom," who shipwreck themselves on the rocks of presumption on the way out to the open sea, then go out, buy a new boat, and do it again. Freedom is not a lecture but a practicum, and like most of life's lessons, we all seem to learn the hard way.

The truth of the matter is that freedom itself can be a false god, a worship substitute that we can inadvertently exalt over Christ. We regularly pick on the Pharisees and their New Testament co-horts as freedom stealers, but we forget about those Corinthians who swung the pendulum to the opposite extreme, plunging a gifted group of freedom-loving folks into arrogance, egotism, competition, and tolerance of blatant immorality. Paul warns in Colossians 2 about being taken captive by "hollow and deceptive philosophies" rooted in human traditions and the world's principles rather than in Christ (v. 8). Fullness and forgiveness are ours, and the tyranny of the written code was nailed to the cross along with His feet and hands (vv. 10, 14).

Religious rules never carry the power to liberate or curb indulgence (Col. 2:20-23). Freedom was never given as our own possession to use as we wish. It is a gift secured by blood. Anything goes? It sounds good, but it isn't freedom.

FREEDOM'S TASTE OF REALITY...

One man's freedom is another man's bondage. Freedom looks differently on each person and in each church. This is the caution: Once one defines freedom, it is arbitrarily bound to one person's perspective or opinion.

Walking gingerly through this vast minefield, dodging the buried munitions of legalism and license, I offer a few practical tips on tasting the reality of freedom:

- **Seek to discover people and places in which your freedom in Christ can be nurtured and expanded.** I'm amazed over the years by believers who remain in a kind of ministry life that robs them of freedom. They cite loyalty to the pastor or friends in the church, or believe that the Lord has them "on assignment" to pray and intercede for the "turnaround." It is difficult to argue with such selfless motives, but I wonder how many well-intentioned Christians waste years shackled in stuck churches where there is little evidence of change or willingness of leaders to taste new wine, no less find a wineskin for it. Business guru Tom Peters wonders if 18 years of experience is actually one year of experience repeated 17 times. Could the same be said about our growth in the things of God, or about the churches to which we are connected? Are we getting freer over the years or merely playing it safe? The wheels of activity may be spinning, but is any real progress being made?
- **Freedom serves an individual as he or she serves a community.** Galatians 5:13 says "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another." Not to minimize the universal

condition of indulgence, but when is the last time you thought about serving as a key aspect of freedom? It's sad to think that serving in many Christian circles is as much of a dirty word as tithing. An obligation accompanied by gritted teeth. A duty with a sigh of resignation. Serving one another by using our God-apportioned giftedness is intended to be a delight as we fulfill our callings. If it isn't a joy, then we're doing it for either the wrong reasons, for the wrong person, from the wrong heart, or all of the above.

- **Adjust your freedom as you go.** Let's once again shatter the myth that there is such a thing as perfect balance or a happy medium. Our passion, zest, and zeal for God come from the fresh fires of extremism and imbalance. A "balanced" Christian life is rooted in boredom. Lovers are notoriously out of balance—we call them crazy in love, faint with love, or love-struck. So, give yourself permission to let that one new revelation become the emphasis for a season even if it means a reduced focus on other truth. We do this all the time without realizing it. Swim in paradox. Scribble outside the lines. Keep the baby, change the bathwater. Be free of what others think! Try a little flexibility, and give yourself the grace and permission that others may not be able to offer. Your freedom may rub off on them, or rub them the wrong way. Either way, God has you covered.
- **What are you going to do about the Holy Spirit?** If you want freedom, you have to go through Trinity Member Three. The Holy Spirit transcends our churchy labels and preconceived notions. He who indwells, empowers, guides, seals, and reveals wants to set you free from fear, even from the greatest deception these days: the fear of His working in your life in ways you may not understand but need nonetheless!

WELCOME TO THE DANCE

If it all sounds a bit schizophrenic, welcome to Freedomland! Freedom winks at us. It is available but elusive. It is a dance where shins get kicked and toes are stepped on before the partners move in fluidity. There is a knowing that we are freer now than we once were, but not as free as we're going to be.

That prolific author Anonymous writes, "Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty, well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming, 'Wow, what a ride!'" This isn't an excuse for sloppy temple upkeep and reckless life management, but a push forward to relish the abundance in Christ with the abandon of a child.

There are many more rivers to cross, more holes to dig, and greater depths of freedom to enjoy. With the help of the Spirit, we'll slay the giants within and the ones in the land, and the victory will be ours.

Don Toshach, after spending time as a writer and editor, planted several churches and pastored for almost 15 years. He is also on Souleader's ministry team and board of directors. Any portion of this article can be used without permission, but with proper attribution of the author. For more information contact don@souleader.org.